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Ace-High Western Stories

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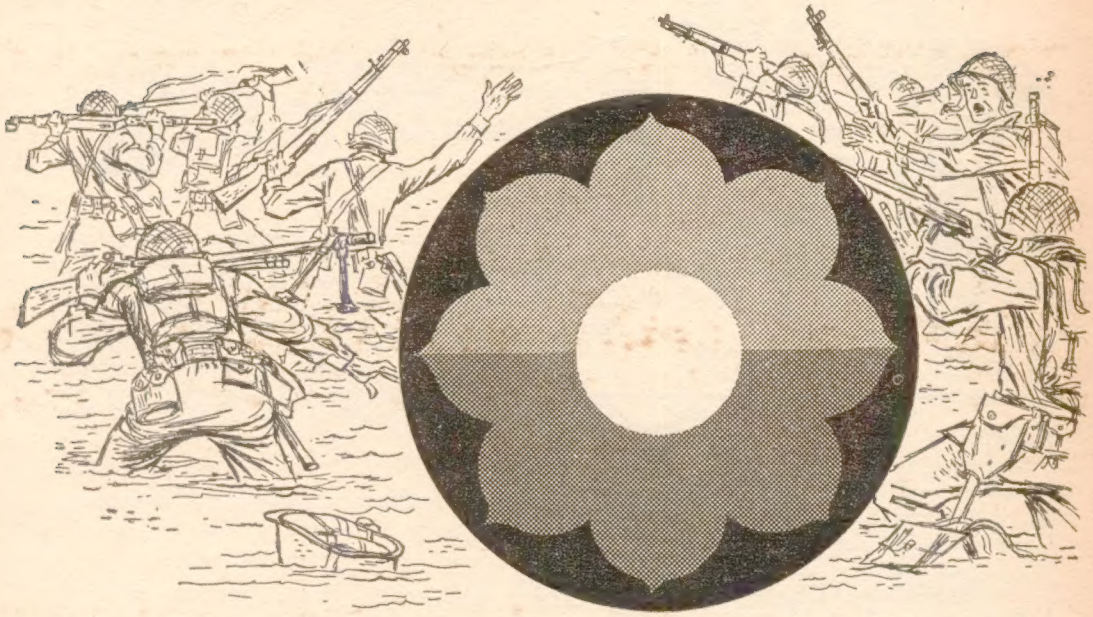
Only real men can wear it



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SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

TOD HANSEN

1

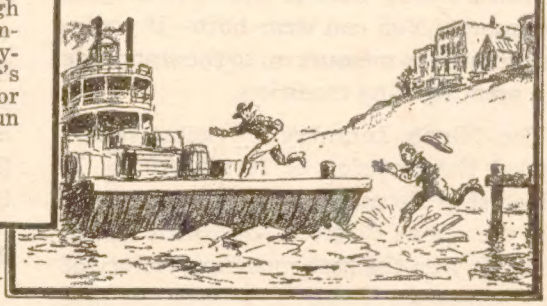
Tod Hansen was a badly frightened young man when he ran away from the scene of the Territorial Trust Company bank robbery in Rock Center, Texas, and like all frightened men, he was dangerous. As far as was known, he had never committed a crime before and was very anxious to get away with this one. When on Feb. 12, 1866, he swung aboard a train headed for the coast, Deputy Charles Raines was right behind him.

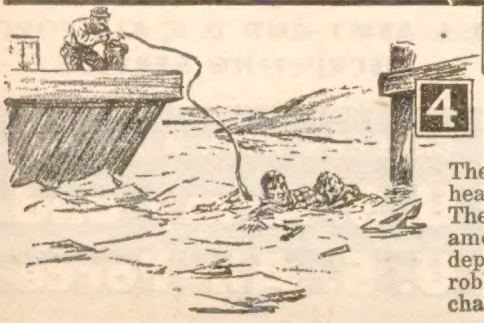
2

It was the beginning of a chase that lead over nearly 3,000 miles of the West, a trail that twisted and turned and doubled back on itself and went through 35 town in seven states. Once, in Denver, Hansen dodged the deputy by burying himself in the mud of a rancher's pig pen. Another narrow squeak for the fugitive resulted in a furious gun battle in El Paso.

3

The payoff came a year later on a string of Mississippi barges aboard which the criminal had sailed upstream. At St. Louis the deputy sighted Hansen and jumped for the barge. He missed, landing in the icy water.





4

The fugitive watched him sink, weighted by his heavy clothing, his gun belt—and the handcuffs. Then, almost against his will, Hansen jumped in among the floating ice and dragged him out. The deputy survived without injury. The heroic bank robber died of pneumonia three days later. The chase had ended.

A SOLID HIT WITH MEN EVERYWHERE

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AND THESE OTHER FEATURES...

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER... A Daring Exposé of the Most Sensational Murder Trial of Our Times; A Timely Sportsman's Almanac article on fishing; The "Great Armored Car Robbery"; and "Las Vegas, Bargain Basement Monte Carlo."

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GUN-DOC OF

When Sheriff Reb Keener cheated his own legal hangnoose of Pete Benbow's neck at gunpoint, young Doc Pete figured that a lead-poisoning plague was due to hit the wild Witch Creek country, wiping out both the Mormon nesters as well as his dad, whose guts young Doc hated—and wished he had!

CHAPTER ONE

Midnight Ride

PETE BENBOW had played hunches all his life, but this one would be played for him. Reb Keener and his gun-toting deputies would attend to the chore. Pete lay on his hard

Yukon Shard dismounted and was leveling his saddle gun. . . .

Epic Novel of the Cattle Country

By CLIFF M. BISBEE

jail pallet and watched the trio stalk into the dark rear part of the Witch Creek calaboose. In the dim yellow lamplight that filtered from the sheriff's office up front they made hulking, ominous shadows out there on the "free side" of the iron bars.

Though Pete Benbow pretended to snore, his hunch was riding hard and every jagged nerve was drawn tight. He heard the thudding footsteps halt outside his cell, the grate of a key in the rusty old lock.

"Pile out of it, Benbow. You're goin' for a ride."

Pete let his eyes come open, but stayed

. . . Pete knew a yell was torn from his throat as he left the saddle.

where he was. The lamplight gleamed on guns held by Sheriff Reb Keener and his two deputies.

"Deuce of a time to spoil a man's sleep," Pete grumbled. "How am I going to fatten up for my own hanging?"

"Shut up, Benbow. Pull on your boots."

The sheriff stood over him, thumbs hooked into an ornate gunbelt. Reb Keener was a stocky, thick-necked man who liked wearing a lawbadge for the frequent chances it provided of riding roughshod over other men. He was strong as a range bull. No matter when you saw him, his hard jowls were covered with a ragged growth of dirty beard. Keener's speaking voice was little more than a hoarse whisper.

"Git up!"

Pete had already sat up and was reaching for his boots. As he groped under the pallet Keener slapped him hard across the face with the back of one thick, hairy hand, heavy as a club.

Pete grunted, and one of the deputies laughed. Suddenly Pete propelled himself forward, jamming both legs down hard, his thigh muscles like steel springs. His head crashed square into the sheriff's protruding belly and wind was driven in an audible gust from Keener's lungs. The lawman went backward, slamming against the cell partition. Yet before Pete could recover balance, one of the deputies brought a gun barrel down in a lashing blow that caught him on the nape of the neck. He went down, dazed, gasping, his head swaying dizzily.

Keener kicked him hard in the ribs with a heavy boot.

"Now git a move on, you sulphur-gutted college cow doctor!"

Still dazed, Pete managed to drag on his boots. "What's the hurry, Keener? This has all the earmarks of a midnight bushwhack party. I'm slated to swing a week from tomorrow at daybreak. Can't Yukon Shard wait that long?"

Pete was grinning a little now, in spite of the dead certainty that this would be his last ride. Reb Keener might be taking him out to a private drygulch party, but they'd never hear Pete Benbow whine about it.

The four days since he'd had to shoot Little Sam Little had aged Pete in appearance. He was twenty-four years old. In the half-dark of the jail he looked like an Indian. The tall, supple build, the wide cheekbones and blunt chin, and a prominent, slightly hooked nose gave him that look. But coming forward ahead of the lawmen into stronger lamplight, brought out the tawny color of his hair and an almost startling blueness of his eyes.

Pete was a quarter-blood Ute. His father, Harry Benbow, had come from New England and stayed to marry a beautiful half Ute girl. As a result Harry Benbow had been ostracized by his family. Hard-headed and stubborn, he pretended indifference. But he had sent his son Pete to college to become a medical doctor, which was in the back-east family tradition.

Pete, on the stubborn side himself, had become a veterinary surgeon instead! And Rail-O Harry Benbow had told Pete he was henceforth cut off short at the pockets, and to hell with him. . . .

PETE stumbled on through Keener's disordered office and through the front door, prodded by the sheriff's gun barrel. He had it doped out that Yukon Shard was afraid the salty Rail-O cowpokes and old Gila River Joe, the Rail-O foreman, might break Pete out of jail before the date set for the hanging. In spite of the Old Man's open declaration that his cow doctoring son could simmer in his own juice.

Yukon Shard owned the High-Hole Saloon, where Pete had killed Little Sam Little. The card-sharp monte dealer had

reached for a gun when Pete called him on a flagrantly crooked deal. Half a dozen men around the table had seen that deal with their own eyes. Pete bluntly called it for the dirty play it was, and Sam Little reached for a hideout gun.

Even then Pete would most likely have died right there in his chair, if someone had not swiftly slid a cocked gun onto the table in front of him. Little Sam Little, cursing, lurched to his feet, murder gleaming in his eyes. Pete Benbow picked up the cocked gun and shot the dealer through the heart.

Several witnesses said right out in the saloon that Pete had done the only thing he could do. It was shoot, or be shot. Little Sam Little was no loss to the community, they said. Yukon Shard coldly ordered the body packed away and the mess cleaned up off his saloon floor. Pete took a couple of stiff drinks and walked out to his little office shack at the edge of town.

He had hung his shingle up there just one month ago. The shingle said:

PETE BENBOW—VETERINARY SURGEON —SPECIALIST IN LIVESTOCK DISEASES

He had fooled around with some cultures he was breeding in several little glass dishes. They were serums for livestock diseases; part of an experiment he was carrying out. There was no disease on Witch Creek range, unless you counted a lusty young range war as one.

Along toward morning, he had tossed himself onto a cot for a bit of sleep. And in the raw, early daylight Reb Keener came pounding at his door, with a warrant for Pete Benbow's arrest, charging murder. They took him to the town lockup. Day before yesterday a jury handpicked by Yukon Shard had declared him guilty of shooting Little Sam Little, without provocation or justification. They recommended hanging, and Wall-Eye Nolan, Witch Creek's circuit-riding justice, had taken whiskey-fogged delight in pronouncing the sentence.

Now, Pete thought numbly, as he lurched out into the dark bobtail end of Manzanita Street ahead of Reb Keener and his silent deputies, it looked as if Yukon Shard was too impatient to wait for a hanging.

Pete growled over his shoulder: "I know you're Shard's man, Keener. Why don't you plant a bullet in my back and get it over with? You can claim I broke jail and you shot me as I hit the street."

He said it with an ironic bitterness, and the sheriff gave him a hard jab with his gun.

"Don't tempt me, Benbow. Climb that cayuse!"

One of the deputies pushed him toward a bony claybank horse. Pete stepped up into the saddle and the other deputy came alongside with a piece of lead rope.

"Lay your hands on the nubbin."

Pete did as he was told. Though wild schemes of escape drummed through his mind, he knew that with guns trained on him constantly, he'd be dead before he got six yards. The deputy tied his hands to the saddlehorn so tight that the rope cut raw furrows into his wrists.

"That's a packhorse you're straddlin'," Reb Keener told him. "He's wearin' a halter but no reins or hackmore guide rope. He'll foller another cayuse, but you'll waste time tryin' to haze him into a breakaway."

The others mounted and the sheriff led them out of town. Pete's animal stayed close on the tail of Keener's horse, while the two deputies brought up the rear. They broke into a jog-trot as soon as the outskirts were reached, and within half a mile left the main road for the wagon track toward Roadrunner Springs.

They don't want to do it right in town,

Pete thought. *Most likely any minute now. . . .*

But they kept on at that steady gait.

The black sky had been overcast, but now clouds broke apart in one long streak. The moon rode clear, bright and round as a newly minted silver dollar. By its light Pete saw the tumbled rangeland that flanked all this end of Witch Creek. They were skirting the brink of a wide coulee, going in a direction almost opposite to the Rail-O Ranch. This road would take them to the scattered nester outfits up along the broken rimrock; the Mormon homesteaders that blunt old Harry Benbow had sworn to drive off Witch Creek range.

But of course, they'd never get that far. The wagon track dipped into the coulee up ahead. That's where they'd drygulch him. They were making a job of it.

CHAPTER TWO

Cow Doc's Chore

CLOSE to the deeper shadows hemming the coulee, a horse and rider moved into view. A voice called, "I see you got him, Keener."

"We got him, Yukon. And I still say you're crazy as a locoed bronc."

Moonlight gleamed on the tall gambler's white teeth. "My business, Sheriff. Let's shake it up a little now, or the man will be dead before we get there."

"It doesn't sound," said Pete, "like you're speaking of me."

"Another fellow," conceded Yukon Shard, and led the way down into the shadows. The air was chilly, and darker, but Pete didn't require the moon's light to see what manner of man was Yukon Shard.

He had seen enough of him, and to spare, since he had returned home to Witch Creek. He would, he felt, know Yukon Shard in hell.

The big dude gambler was a handsome man, if you happened to like his type, which Pete Benbow did not. He had a faintly olive complexion, heavy black brows and a mustache trimmed so close it looked like a painted black streak on Shard's long upper lip. His eyes were pale green, with a slight droop to the left lid. His hair was thick and black, with just a touch of gray at the temples. He might be thirty, or thirty-five, or forty. You couldn't tell. When he smiled, which was rather too frequently, you always felt as if an icy breeze had come knifing along your backbone.

No one knew if Yukon Shard had any interest in the range war that was growing between Harry Benbow's Rail-O and the Mormon nesters. He was secretive, mysterious in his ways. There had been no Yukon Shard in Witch Creek, Pete reflected, when he had gone away to college. But then, there had been no grass feud, either. Gila River Joe had visited Pete in jail. The foreman told Pete that Yukon Shard had tipped Harry Benbow to a herd of beef, over the line in Idaho, that could be bought for a song. The Rail-O punchers were already on the way back to the range with them, where they'd help push Bide Ellenkamp's rag-tag herds off the best grass.

That didn't mean Shard was siding Benbow against the Mormon's, of course. Pete knew only one thing about him for sure, because the thing was obvious from any angle. Yukon Shard, after six months in Witch Creek, already had his own man in the sheriff's office and his long gambler's fingers into half a dozen rich pies around this stretch of northeastern Nevada. He was a middle-sized pumpkin already, and aiming to grow bigger.

"Who is it," asked Pete, as they rode along at the same jog-trot, "that might be dead before we get there?"

Shard's brief laugh drifted back.

"Verne Ellenkamp. It seems he's been shot in the back. By a Rail-O person, yet unknown. We're going to find out if an expensive college education is worth anybody's damn."

A barking of dogs cut the cold, ghostly silence of the range. A few minutes later they crossed another coulee to the narrower bench where Bidewell Ellenkamp had thrown up his Swallowtail Ranch buildings. Most of the clouds had drifted, leaving a sky clear and deeply aquamarine, studded with bright stars. The few clouds left seemed edged with phosphorescence. It was a beautiful night. Too beautiful, thought Pete, for the dirty business afoot.

Nights like this had made him homesick while he was away at that California university. Studying to be a cow doctor on the Old Man's money—while Old Man Harry Benbow was bragging around that some day his boy would make the finest medico in Nevado—had been a dirty trick, Pete reckoned now. He couldn't really blame the Old Man for saying Pete had made his own tepee, and could live or die in it. Pete shook his head, considered the present.

Yukon Shard's remark had handed him a jolt, gave him to know that this was not a drygulch party.

"Gila River Joe told me you rigged a dicker for the Rail-O to buy some Idaho beef, Shard," Pete said now, just to make conversation, and because the knowledge that he still had his week to live gave him a lift and made him feel reckless. "Now you're pulling for the Mormon bunch. Looks like you cut your deck both ways."

Yukon Shard gave his cold laugh. " I'm riding the high fence between this grass war, Benbow. But neither side gets a slant at my hole cards till I'm ready to spread 'em on the table."

Lamplight showed from several windows of the solid rock-and-mud ranchhouse. As they came abreast of a big barn a gruff voice lashed out from deep shadows.

"Haul up an' stay put, ontil we git a look at ye."

"We brought the vet, Ellenkamp. How's Verne?"

BIDE ELLENKAMP came out into the moonlight, a towering, gaunt figure. He wore a dark beard that came halfway to his belt. His gray shock of hair was bare. Hard brown eyes glared up at Pete Benbow as Reb Keener got down and untied the prisoner's hands.

"Verne's alive, but poorly. Be ye good at gunshots wounds, young feller?"

Pete gave a short, mirthless laugh. "Once I took a .30-30 slug from a high priced range bull, some Boston dude hunter mistook for a grizzly. I've never operated on a man."

"Keep your guns on him," snarled Keener to his deputies, as Pete climbed down and began rubbing his wrists to restore circulation.

Pete grinned at Bide Ellenkamp. "The sheriff doesn't want to get cheated out of hanging me. . . . I'm a horse doctor, or a cow doctor—depending on which you need. I suppose they brought me out here because Verne might die before a sure-enough medico could be brought in from Twin Falls or Elko, Nevada."

The old man looked Pete Benbow straight in the eye. "My datter, Delia, found Verne yonder on the range, where he was fixin' to throw a fence round one of our waterholes. It may have been the Rail-O foreman that shot him, or one of the punchers. Then again it might have been Harry Benbow himself."

Pete gave back Ellenkamp's level gaze. "My father never shot any man in the back. Neither did Gila River Joe. Neither did any of the Rail-O cowpokes. Harry Benbow wants to drive you nesters off

the range where he's been kingpin cowboss for twenty years, and if he can, he'll do it. But the Old Man would kill the Rail-O ranch hand who shot an enemy in the back."

Yukon Shard's smooth voice slid in. "Better let him get at the chore."

"D'rectly." Bide Ellenkamp pulled a long-barreled Frontier pistol out of a leather sheath. He thumbed back the hammer. "I'm holdin' this gun on you, Benbow, until you git the job done. If Verne dies on your hands, may God have mercy on your soul."

A yellow rectangle of light had sprung into the wall of the ranch house, and the old man swung around and led the way. Ellenkamp's daughter Delia stepped aside in the doorway to let her father and Pete come in. Reb Keener started to crowd in behind, but old Bide threw out one powerful arm to bar the way.

"You can wait outside for your prisoner, Sheriff. I'm obliged to ye, Shard."

"Benbow might make a break and get away," Keener protested, his bulging eyes staring past Bide to the golden-haired girl.

"Not from me he won't," growled Ellenkamp, and he shut the heavy plank door in their faces.

Delia Ellenkamp led them into the back bedroom where Verne was stretched belly down on a bunk. Even in her plain gray homespun dress Delia was the prettiest girl Pete Benbow had ever seen. He had spotted her a time or two in town when she came in with a buckboard for supplies. But here in the soft lamplight, with her sunbonnet off, she was like a rare cameo brooch in a 'Frisco store window. Pete caught one flashing look from eyes as dark as shadowed trout pools in a mountain stream, then she looked away.

"I think it's a mistake, father, bringing Harry Benbow's son to fix Verne. He's not even a doctor." She said this quietly, but with a firm tone that made Pete wince a little. He waited for Bide's answer.

"This ain't no time for sentiment. If the slug was in his leg or such like place, I'd dig it out myself. But it's lodged in a lung, or clost to it, and near the heart. I'm scared to probe."

AFTERWARDS, Verne Ellenkamp lay on his side, showing a bone-white profile. His eyes were closed. There was a froth of blood on his lips. His powerful torso was bare from the waist up. Just under the left shoulder blade and slightly to one side, was a clean white bandage that Pete Benbow had just applied.

Pete straightened up and looked soberly at the unconscious man. It had been a delicate job, retrieving that .30-30 slug. No doctor or surgeon could have done better, working with hunting knife and kitchen tools, plus needle and clean linen thread from Delia Ellenkamp's sewing basket!

"You—think he'll live?"

The voice came, softly, at his elbow. He turned slowly, blinking in the lamplight, staring at the girl, then past her to the towering, gaunt and ominously watchful figure of her father. For the past hour he had almost forgotten them. He had concentrated on the job he had been called upon to perform, had given it everything he had. He felt suddenly very tired, as remembrance of his own fate flooded back.

"I hope so. I feel that he will," he answered the girl. "I can't promise. But I've done my best. The rest will be up to you, though of course I'll come back and see him, if Reb Keener can be talked into bringing me out. By the time I'm—no longer available, your brother should be out of danger."

High color swept her pale features and her dark eyes looked up into his face. "I'm sorry—about that remark I made when you came in. Father, can't we do something for Mr. Benbow?"

The old man had come to his feet also. All during the past hour he had sat there watching the silent operation, watching Pete Benbow sweating and working so skillfully to save Verne's life. Now his hawk-like old features were working strangely. Suddenly he stooped down and pulled a box from under Verne's bunk. From it he took a long-barreled Frontier gun which was an exact duplicate of his own. He straightened and faced Pete.

"If I give ye this, it might be ye could git away. Either on the way back to town, or mebbyso later on. . . . But if ye do so, can my datter care for Verne?"

"Even if I'm lucky enough to get away, I'll come see Verne somehow. That's a promise."

Ellenkamp handed him the gun and Pete stowed it inside his shirt. He grinned at them then, warmly. "Makes a difference in how I feel, let me tell you!" Then he sobered. "One more thing—before you turn me over to the sheriff and Yukon Shard. I told you no one from Rail-O shot Verne in the back. That's the truth. Harry Benbow hates you homesteading Mormons, but he's not the backshooting kind."

Ellenkamp's craggy features went hard again, and he said bluntly. "Benbow wants us off the grass he's been usin' and claimin' for his own. He warned us not to fence that waterhole and pasture, or take the consequence. We wired it, and Verne gits shot."

"And what does Yukon Shard suggest you do to retaliate?" Pete asked the question just as bluntly, and the old man's head jerked up.

"Shard pinted out that this shootin' give us a plain excuse to start gunnin' for Rail-O riders, and maybe for Harry Benbow and his foreman." The oldster's dark eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Ye figger Shard stands to gain by stirrin' trouble twixt us that's been fightin' over the range, don't you?" he asked Pete.

"It's my guess," Pete admitted, then shook his head. "But I don't know how. Nor do I know why he's so keen on seeing me hang. Well, thanks for the gun. Maybe it'll keep me from a hangnoose. Meanwhile I hope you can find a way of settling the squabble with my father peaceably, though I admit he's a stubborn old cuss."

"We want no war, but we'll stand no shovin' around either," Bide Ellenkamp growled. "Now, datter, open the front door, 'fore that fool sheriff busts it down with his poundin'. . . ."

FEVERISHLY, but with caution, Pete worked his wrists in the knotted rope that held them to the saddlehorn. He used the horn as a fulcrum and pried his wrists steadily apart, feeling the muscles on his arms and shoulders cord with the effort. Finally he was rewarded by feeling the bonds loosen.

In another hundred yards, when they reached that deep patch of shade ahead, he'd make his break for freedom. No use waiting until he was back inside Reb Keener's jail, where a better chance might not come, and where the gun might be discovered. It was just fool's luck that the deputy hadn't felt it while tying his hands, back there at Ellenkamp's. . . .

Yukon Shard rode in the lead, with Keener just ahead of the packhorse bearing the prisoner, the two deputies behind. The gambler had been obviously impatient at the time spent waiting while Pete worked on Verne Ellenkamp. They kept up a brisk pace back to town.

Now, just as Pete felt one wrist slip free of the rope, Shard pulled his mount to a halt. Reb Keener stopped also, his broad, humped figure half in shadow, half in the moonlight. The other horses stopped silently.

Shard's voice came, sharp in the pre-

dawn, ghostly silence. "All right, men. Make it snappy."

Pete waited, flexing his fingers, his own desperate scheme thrown off guard by this abrupt change. He was not certain what was up now, though already a cold premonition gripped him.

From behind came a callous laugh. "What'll it be, Shard—a gut shot to make him squall?"

"No." The gambler's white teeth showed plainly in his chill, mirthless grin. "Quick and clean. We've other fish to fry. Better do it yourself, Keener. Can't afford a bungle now."

Reb Keener's bulky figure turned slowly in the saddle just ahead, right hand reaching for his carbine. The truth came stabbing through Pete's momentarily stunned mind.

So it's a drygulch party, after all!

Pete's free right hand slid quickly inside his shirt. His fingers closed around the comforting, curved butt of Verne Ellenkamp's frontier pistol.

He jammed heels viciously into the packhorse's flanks, in the tenderest place he could reach. The animal let out a startled grunt and lurched clumsily forward, crowding hard against the sheriff's mount, which in turn skittered sideways in the trail.

Keener let out one cursing bawl of surprise and tried to jerk his carbine around where he could use it. But Pete was now too close, crowding him. The sheriff snarled, trying to keep his balance. Pete got his pistol out and swung it up in a swift, chopping blow that connected with the sheriff's temple, just under the hat brim.

Keener sagged limply, toppling sideways. Pete kicked one foot free of the stirrup and lashed out with a boot toe into the belly of Keener's horse. The animal skittered again and the sheriff plunged off headfirst into the brush.

It took this much time for Yukon Shard and the pair of deputy lawmen to collect their wits. Now, even as Pete raked off his hat and batted his packhorse alongside the head with it, the gambler gave vent to a sharp order.

"Kill him, you fools! Kill—"

His voice was cut off by the bark of his own gun, as he jerked it up and began firing point-blank at the escaping prisoner. Pete threw back one fast, wild shot, then another in the direction of the deputies, who had now brought their guns into play.

Between the three of them, they'll get me! The thought ran hotly through Pete's brain, as he bent low and kicked his heels into the packhorse's flanks. Without reins, with only his flailing hat to guide the animal, there was little chance to seek any real opening for an escape. . . .

Pete just hung on and rode.

WHEN the next hail of lead came he knew without looking back that he was putting some space between himself and the others—though by no means enough. A stab of pain along his right side told him he was hit. His hat was suddenly snatched mysteriously from his fingers, sent sailing into the brush.

"Shoot him, damn you, shoot him!" screamed Yukon Shard, when his own gun went empty.

It was the packhorse's erratic flight, Pete knew, that had thus far saved him. He threw back one frantic glance, saw Yukon Shard had dismounted and was leveling his saddle gun, his trained mount the only one to hold steady in that thundering hail of gunfire.

Pete twisted, jerking his Frontier pistol up once more and letting go a shot. Then one of the deputies fired, and the packhorse reared abruptly. Hoofs dug frantically at the brink of the coulee rim. For a stark second they hovered there—then plunged over.

Pete Benbow knew a yell was torn from his throat as he left the saddle. He also knew, with a grim inner certainty that this wild plunge into the brushy coulee was the thing that saved him. Even as he hung poised on the edge for that brief fraction of a second bullets had raked the air around him. Then he was over the brink, falling with sickening force into the tangling thickets below. He saw the packhorse crash down beside him, grunting with the heavy impact. It spun over and skidded down the talus slope.

Pete crawled to his knees, scrambled for the deepest shadow as voices cut the abrupt silence overhead.

"Where is he? Can't you useless galoots hit anything at all? Blast it, get back on your horses and we'll make a search below. Maybe he broke his damfool neck."

Pete crawled on down to the bottom, just as the packhorse lurched to its feet and stood there, shaking its head dazedly. Pete grinned in relief and sprung aboard. The horse jerked into life, uttered a moan of protest at Pete's gouging heels, and lined out up the coulee at a pounding run.

But now fresh lead began searching him as the pursuers hit the trail, and a glance back showed four figures limned briefly against the pale sky. Keener was back into the action.

Pete hauled to a stop and jumped down, broke off a pliable switch. He applied it briskly to the animal's hindquarters without remounting, and the horse squealed and leaped into a clumpsy gallop that took it out of sight beyond the nearest twisting slope. Pete sped sideways, threw himself into heavy brush and crawled forward on hands and knees through brittle twigs that raked furrows in his face and tore his clothes.

Hoofs were drumming louder, now close by. Reb Keener's bawling yell lifted. "Keep a'goin', boys. That hellion ain't got the chance of a grease spot on a hot skillet. We'll get him, for sure!"

Pete froze where he was, gripping the pistol, waiting while the four horses pounded by not twenty yards away. He stood up and watched them fade around the slope.

"So now," soberly mumbled Pete, "I'm free. Afoot, and plenty bruised, but alive, and with some chores to do."

CHAPTER THREE

Man on the Dodge

MORNING broke slowly across Witch Creek's wide, sparse range. The shadowed gloom was dispelled first from higher slopes and ridges, then chased from the twisted hollows.

Pete Benbow stood shivering on a brushy promontory. He was hungry, chilled to the marrow of his aching bones, and sore in more places than he cared to count. He had examined the burning wound on his side, where the bullet had brushed the skin, and decided it was a superficial wound that would heal soon enough without treatment.

Several fat sage hens bustled industriously in the brush within easy pistol range, seeking early bugs. Pete lifted Ellenkamp's gun, then sighed and lowered it. His stomach could damned well struggle along, even for days—but his neck could only stretch once! No telling whom a pistol shot might bring prowling.

Long before daylight his pursuers had returned down the coulee from their fruitless chase. Doubtless they had finally seen the empty saddle of the packhorse and known that their quarry had given them the slip. Pete had crawled into an eroded hollow under the bluff and listened with grinning satisfaction to Keener's vitriolic rage as the four rode back toward town.

They would be after him again, little doubt of that. Yukon Shard was suf-

ficiently interested in Pete Benbow to play Johnny-behind-the-deuce during Pete's so-called trial. Likewise interested enough to order his drygulching. It was unlikely Shard would leave any stones unturned in running him down.

In the badlands that lay above and beyond the rimrock to the eastward, he might find a measure of safety. It was a long hike by the devious route he'd have to take to avoid being overhauled, but having no other choice, he started out.

He had crossed two coulees and was heading into a third, somewhat warmed by the exertion of walking, when a horse reared suddenly from the brush ahead. It trotted off, snorting, then swung to stare—empty-saddled and with stirrups flopping. Pete almost laughed out loud.

"For a packhorse, you packed me into and out of a heap of trouble last night old son," he said. "Here, fellow. Come, boy. How about a nice handful of oats, or will this gravel do?"

The animal stood ground, curious. "Too bad I had to fool you," Pete told him as he put his belt around the animal's neck.

He undid the loosened cinch and drew it into better position, tightened it and climbed aboard. Pete pondered, scowling, then got off again and found a sharp rock. With that he sawed off the longest and strongest saddle strings and fashioned a hackamore of sorts.

Back in the saddle again, with the belt for a rein, he started off in high good humor. Pete watched all day from a high rocky ridge knifing up at the edge of the malpais. Four seperate times he glimpsed a small knot of riders combing the lower range. He was glad he'd got out of there, because he'd have had to duck into a badger hole to avoid Reb Keener's posse.

Another thing he spotted from his high and safe vantage point was a herd of beef approaching from the north-east. So Gila River Joe had told the story straight. Harry Benbow was bring in a herd from Idaho—stock that would help him in his war to crowd the Mormon's off the grass.

Pete recalled something Harry Benbow had told him once, long ago. "What do you think makes a man important on any cow range?" he had asked his son. "What puts him in the king-jack-deuce class?"

"Sand," Pete had guessed, with a grin. "Guts, some call it, though it ain't such a purty word."

The Old Man had laughed and slammed him on the shoulder. "You named half of it, kid. It takes plenty guts, all right. But it likewise takes cows. Beef on the hoof. The man with the most is boss of anybody's cow range, provided, like you say, he's got guts."

So, thought, Pete, it was cows that war-necked old Harry Benbow aimed to acquire, now that he found himself up against the problem of having to share Witch Creek range with a bunch of two-bit Mormon nesters. Due to one thing and another—poor grass years and such—the Rail-O herds had dwindled. Now Harry Benbow was going to increase them—all in one big chunk. Because it looked to Pete as if there were close to a thousand animals in the slowly moving herd that was spreading across the landscape from Idaho.

They would reach a fairish stretch of Witch Creek grass, and the North Fork of the creek itself along about dusk, Pete figured.

"By that time I'll be plumb starved to death, old hoss," he told his sorry looking animal. The packhorse had spent most of the day nibbling, burro-fashion, at the sparse shrubbery that tried to grow up here in the malpais.

"Or I would be, if I stayed here," Pete amended. "Looking at a thousand head of walking beef steaks has made me disinclined to die a lingering death. Yonder a couple of miles below us is the nearest Mormon ranch, which belongs to a gent named Abijah Koehneg. Two weeks ago

I saved a milk cow for the man. He might remember a favor that long. . . ."

For a few minutes after he rode into Koehneg's ranch yard he wondered if he had stuck his neck out too far for his own good. The nester, a gimlet-eyed man with a pronounced curve to his lengthy backbone, dropped out of the barn and looked Pete Benbow over.

"Hear tell your pappy or mebbyso one of his riders shot Verne Ellenkamp plumb 'twixt the shoulder blades," Koehneg declared, in a scarcely friendly tone.

Pete decided to brazen it out. "Not exactly between 'em, Koehneg. A little to the left side, you might say."

Koehneg looked startled. "How do you know so?"

Because I took the bullet out," Pete. "Late last night."

He did not bother to add that he's been hauled out there under guard. Koehneg stood there thinking that over with no hostile move and Pete decided to push his luck a little further.

"I haven't had anything to eat all day. Quite a ride to town. Figured you might be kind enough to give me a saddletramp's hand-out."

"Come on to the house," said the nester, and turned to lead the way.

UNDER the eyes of Koehneg and his wife Pete linked into the beans and bread and greens set out by the woman. Koehneg made desultory talk. Pete had downed enough to feel some better when voices and the thud of hoofs became audible from across the bench. Koehneg saw Pete's abrupt freezing, his suddenly wary look.

Without a word the nester went to the nearest window and looked out. "It's that hardcase sheriff and some others. Looks uncommon like a posse."

"It is," said Pete, deciding honesty was not only the best, but the only policy that gave him a Chinaman's chance. "They're after me. Been hiding out all day. Hadn't you heard I'd been jailed for killing a gambler in Yukon Shard's place?"

"I heard talk," Koehneg admitted, while his wife looked frightened. "Then you were lying about doctoring Verne?"

Pete talked very fast, and in a low tone. "No. Shard and Keener took me out there. I took the bullet out of Verne. He'd have died in another hour, sure. Ellenkamp and his girl gave me a gun—this one, see?" He let them see the butt of it inside his shirt. "I used it to get away on the ride back to town. I'm asking you to hide me, Koehneg, until this posse leaves."

"If Bide Ellenkamp helped him, Pa, we can," put in the woman, and the nester nodded. There was just time to get him into a windowless pantry off the kitchen before horses were jostling outside, and seconds later a heavy fist hammered on the door.

Pete held the door of the pantry open a slight crack so he could hear.

"You seen anything of that young vet—Benbow's son?" came the sheriff's rasping voice. "We're lookin' for him. Broke jail last night."

"Seen nobody," said Koehneg.

Suddenly one of the possemen let out a crow of surprise. "Hey, Reb! Ain't that Shard's old pack hoss?"

Pete felt his heart jump. Instinctively his hand touched the gun butt.

"Was about to suggest maybe that was young Benbow's horse," the nester put in, without any particular interest in his voice. "It drifted in an hour or so ago. Since no one followed, I thought I'd put it in the corral pretty soon. Had an idea there'd be some cussing cowboy after it."

There was a minute or two of suspicious discussion outside, then the sheriff spoke again. "Stick the critter in your corral then, Koehneg. Till Shard sends for it. Guess our man wasn't ridin' it. Got news for you, while I'm here, Koehneg. Harry Benbow's Rail-O outfit is bringing

in a big bunch of hungry beef to hog the grass from you fellas. Dirty damn trick, I call it. Other men like yourself are gatherin', so I hear tell, at Bide Ellenkamp's. Makin' war talk."

Koehneg was silent awhile after this news, while Pete wondered if there was some way out of this uncomfortable trap.

Koehneg spoke at last. "Gathering at Bide's, eh? Where you stand in this thing, Sheriff?"

The Shard-purchased lawman laughed coarsely. "What I don't see or hear I don't know nothin' about! And I can be damned awful deef and blind, if need be."

With that there came the creaking of saddles again, and presently the hoof sounds as the posse rode westward, apparently returning to Witch Creek. Pete came out into the kitchen and gave the nester a fervid thanks.

"Forget it," said Koehneg. "Guess you heard what he said. I'm heading for Ellenkamp's."

"Me, too," declared Pete.

The nester and his wife looked surprised until Pete added, "I promised to look at Verne again. This seems like a good time. Might be my last chance."

"I'm glad we hid you," said Mrs. Koehneg. "I guess you're not much like your father."

"Not much at that," Pete admitted. "But Harry Benbow's not so bad as he's sometimes painted. I'm counting on Verne telling his folks that it was no Rail-O rider, much less Harry Benbow, that shot him down."

He had to be satisfied with their noncommital looks.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rustled Beef—With Extras!

VERNE had come to several times during the day, Delia Ellenkamp told Pete, but had been too weak to talk.

"His color is good, I'd say," Pete assured the girl as he stood beside the bed and looked down at the injured man. "I'm not a doctor, remember, only a vet. But I think you'll be able to spoon some good nourishing soup into him some time tonight. I'd get it into him at the earliest possible hour, any time he's able to swallow it down. Somebody'll have to sit with him, anyhow."

"Oh, yes!" the girl's voice was very low. She looked up gratefully into Pete Benbow's eyes in a manner that had him somewhat addled.

"It was a fine thing, your coming to see my brother. We know you're risking your life. Father thought maybe you'd ride on over the badlands, leave the country entirely."

"I promised to have a look," Pete said. "Guess I really ought to leave the country, but danged if I want to. For one thing, I don't like to see your people fighting Rail-O. There's no sense in such a war. I figure it could have been averted, but for Yukon Shard. That gambling man has a sneaky finger in the pot somewhere, by God!"

The girl shook her head. "I don't know. You may be right. But my father and the others—they're down in the barn now, talking. They know about the big herd of beef that Rail-O brought in today. Right after Verne's getting shot, well, you can't blame them for being ready to fight."

"I don't," agreed Pete. "But I wish it didn't have to happen. Maybe if I go talk to them. . . ."

She shook her head again. "I don't think it would do any good."

"I'm going to try," he said stubbornly. "You watch Verne, now. Keep him quiet, don't let him get riled up after you get that soup into him. He's going to be all right, Delia." He finished warmly, with a light touch on her gingham sleeve. He felt a hot rush of blood through his veins

when she brushed his hand briefly with her own. Then she led him to the door.

"Good bye!"

"I'm coming back again, Delia. That's another promise!" He turned swiftly and walked down toward the barn, where a big bonfire had been built in the yard.

At least a dozen Mormon nesters crowded around that fire. Ellenkamp towered above the rest. He had gone up to the house when Pete came with Koehneg, but had soon come back here where the others were holding angry discourse.

Pete walked boldly into the center of the group. He faced old Bide. "I know what you're all gathered here for, Ellenkamp. I'd hate to see you tangle with my father's Rail-O."

"We don't want killing, young feller. But somebody tried to kill Verne.

"The men here figure if we ride to meet the Rail-O crew, show 'em we are not to be trod on, Harry Benbow may come to reason. At least, that's what we hope."

"If you're prepared to fight, there'll be a fight," Pete argued. "There's lots of good grass this year. Why fight over it at all?"

Somebody in the bunch laughed bitterly. "Rail-O's crowdin' us, that's all. Sure there's good grass. But after several bad years none of us are in a position to throw any heavy load on the range, if we wanted to, which we don't. A slow and easy build-up over the years, holdin' our own and makin' some kind of fair living is all we ask. But Benbow brings in a herd that'll strip the range in a matter of months."

"That's right," another put in. "He can unload then, and show profit, and the rest of us'll be caught with a gutted range."

It was sound reasoning, and Pete knew it. He knew secretly that rough old Harry Benbow had figured in just that hard-headed way, too. When Shard put him next to a chance to get cheap stock quick-

DON WINS A WELCOME NOW!
HOW ABOUT SUPPER AT THE HOUSE TONIGHT, DON? MY SISTER WANTS TO MEET YOU.
WONDERFUL! I WANT TO MEET HER, TOO!
FUNNY HOW SOME FELLOWS WORRY ABOUT MEETING PEOPLE.
WELL, I USED TO ...BUT NOT SINCE I SWITCHED TO LIFEBUOY!
LIFEBUOY IS THE ONLY SOAP ESPECIALLY MADE TO STOP B.O. — CONTAINS AN EXCLUSIVE PURIFYING INGREDIENT — MY DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH GIVES ME LASTING PROTECTION.
THIS IS FUN, DON! YOU'RE ALWAYS WELCOME HERE.
AND I'LL KEEP WELCOME ... WITH LIFEBUOY!
LIFEBUOY HAS AN AMAZING PURIFYING INGREDIENT THAT STOPS B.O. YOUR DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH IS SO REFRESHING, TOO! USE LIFEBUOY FOR A WEEK AND YOU'LL USE IT FOR LIFE!
Used in the homes of 40 million Americans
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ly, he jumped at it. Pete looked around at the circle of tight faces, noting the flash of firelight in hard, bitter eyes.

"I know you're right, and that my father is wrong," he told them. "Will you hold off any direct move against Rail-O until I have a chance to try to talk Harry Benbow into moving at least a good share of those new critters to some other range?"

"You're forgetting," growled old Bide, "that my son has been shot in the back."

"But you've no proof who did it," Pete came back quietly. His eyes narrowed to a sudden idea. "Listen, Bide. Verne is going to rouse some time tonight. He'll be weak, but hungry. And after he get's some food in him, he should be able to talk—tell who shot him. That waterhole where he was shot is out in the open. No one rode up on Verne unseen, I'm sure. Likely somebody he wasn't afraid to turn his back on talked with him there until he did. Then let him have it, rode off and left him for dead."

The rest of the nesters stood waiting while old Bide Ellenkamp pondered. "Well? What you proposin'" he growled finally.

"That you people wait here until Verne talks before you go off half-cocked. Meanwhile I'll be seeing what good I can do with talking to my father."

"We're willin' to avoid a fight, if it can be avoided," one spoke up promptly.

"Sure."

"Yeah. Let's wait and see what Verne has to say."

Old Bide Ellenkamp shrugged his shoulders. "So be it, then. Them cows ain't goin' to gut the range overnight, I reckon."

"Thanks!" said Pete gratefully. "I won't waste another minute."

AS HIS route to the Rail-O headquarters would take him within a mile of the probable location of the new beef herd, Pete had decided to drop by that way to see which Rail-O men were on hand.

Now he was glad he had, because it appeared that the herd had not yet been scattered, although the place where Pete encountered it was well within the good grass area along the north fork of Witch Creek. He spotted the great trail herd bunched along the creek bottom, and three men squatting around a small fire while several others circled the herd.

Wizened little Gila River Joe jumped to his feet as Pete approached the fire on the packhorse.

"Dadburn my britches!" loudly exclaimed the Rail-O foreman. "Pete, you're hotter'n a potato that's just been raked out of the coals. Reb Keener was by just before dark, primed to shoot you on sight. Claims that you busted out of jail last night."

A tall stranger across the campfire laughed at these words. "Appearances seem to bear out the sheriff's testimony, Joe."

Pete got down and stalked to the fire after looking around and noting that Harry Benbow was not among those present. In fact, barely a third of the Rail-O crew was within sight.

Pete told Gila River Joe, "I didn't break out of jail," "Keener and Yukon Shard took me on a little ride. Among other chores, they aimed to bushwhack me, cold turkey. I took exception to that, with the results that I'm here, whole, and on the prod."

"So'm I on the prod," growled the foreman, kicking a chunk back into the fire. "In fact, if the Old Man hadn't gave me strict orders to keep the herd bunched tonight I'd be headin' for town right now to look up Yukon Shard. Son, we been euchered into buyin' a bunch of stolen critters!"

"Stolen!" Pete stared out beyond the

pale glow of the firelight to the resting herd. "You mean that whole bunch was rustled someplace in Idaho, then turned over to Rail-O?"

"A good bunch of 'em were rustled in Utah," spoke up the quiet stranger.

Gila River looked grim as he introduced the tall man to Pete. "Ernie White, stock detective of Utah. This is the Old Man's son, Pete Benbow."

"I have a bench warrant to serve on Harry Benbow," said the detective. "Harry has a high rep in all three states, but he's also known as a cowman of the oldtime long-loop sort. I remain unconvinced that he didn't connive with the men that delivered these cattle to him north of the Idaho line. Those men faded with no clues to their identity. Gila River Joe here won't describe 'em to me. But Harry Benbow shouldn't be hard to find. I can't serve this bench warrant myself in Nevada—but Reb Keener can, and will. Too bad I got here too late to meet Keener."

"The fella we took delivery from wouldn't take any pay by draft, such as the Old Man carried along," Gila River said. "So the Old Man arranged to meet him in Witch Creek either tonight or tomorrow to give him the cash. I'm bettin' my chips Yukon Shard figures strong in the deal."

"No question in my mind on that score," Pete put in, but the Utah man shook his head.

"Don't know this Shard, or what he had to do with it. All I do know is about half those cattle belong to Utah stockmen. They were spooked north into Idaho, and apparently put in with other stolen stuff there. Now—" White cut Pete a sharp look. "Seems to me I've heard you're a veterinarian. Right?"

"Right," Pete said, puzzled at the man's intent stare out toward the herd. All the while they'd been talking the detective had been looking out there, with a peculiarly worried expression. Now White made a strange request.

"I wish you'd come out there and take a look at that herd. Or rather at certain individual critters I spotted awhile ago when I was looking the bunch over."

Gila River Joe rose again with a heavy sigh. "Pete, I been setting here all the time just hopin' the thing I been most worried about was all in my head. Appears White noticed the same thing."

They walked out toward the herd. "What'd you notice, Joe?" Pete asked.

"Just look 'em over," growled the Rail-O foreman.

IT REQUIRED just about fifteen minutes for Pete Benbow to learn a disquieting fact about the cattle that had been delivered to Harry Benbow fifty odd miles from here across the Idaho state line. He spent that length of time walking about among the resting cattle, there in the bright moonlight, now and then stooping to examine certain individuals.

He came back to where the range detective and Gila River Joe were waiting. "I spotted at least six head definitely near dead with blackleg!" was Pete's grim decision.

"My God!" groaned Ernie White.

Gila River cursed softly, and passed a hand across his eyes in a gesture of weary helplessness. "There's no fool like a man that closes his eyes to the bad things he sees, Pete. All day today I begun to suspect that's what we was bringin' onto the range. I never thought it right out, you might say, but it was there in the back of my head, from observin' them lumpy steers. Guess this row with the Mormon nesters the Old Man's so set on kind of throwed my head out of line."

"You notice which brands are suspect?" White asked next.

"All Boxed-T. Don't know as I recall

ever hearing of it," Pete answered him.

"Me either," said Joe. "It's ironed onto maybe a hundred of them animals."

"It isn't any Utah brand, I'll stake my rep on that," White said. "My guess is the infected bunch are those wearing that Boxed-T, and that they're all rustled Idaho beef thrown into the herd with the others when it crossed from Utah."

"Joe, you'll have to get all those showing any sign out of there—the sooner the quicker. Reckon you can do it at night without rousin' 'em too much?"

"If there ain't too many. Damn! You s'pose the whole dang bunch will be infected by now?"

Pete shrugged. "Let's hope not. Blackleg's mainly caught through sores and cuts and scratches. Get all you can spot away from the rest. If there aren't too many, better shoot the ones that're bad off. Come daylight look 'em over better and cull any others you find. And for gosh sakes don't let any of these animals get farther onto Witch Creek range!"

"It looks," growled the stock detective, "like Old Man Harry Benbow out-foxed himself on this whole dirty play! Me—I'm heading for town."

"And I'm with you," Pete asserted. "We should make it by daylight. Joe, I'll be back here quick as I can make it with stuff for inoculation. It just so happens there are cultures in my lab, that I've been playing around with. If they're still good. . . ."

"Kid—you can't go right into town. Keener'll shoot you down on sight."

"That," said Pete, "is a risk I'll have to take."

CHAPTER FIVE

Witch Creek Gun Show

GRAY dawn was breaking over the sprawled cowtown as they approached from the south. While they were still a mile away Pete broke the long, strained silence that had ridden with the two men nearly all the way from the bedded herd.

"White, I know you're pretty well convinced that Harry Benbow pulled this thing on purpose, knowing the stock he took over were stolen."

"I only know I've a warrant to get served," said the detective grimly.

Pete nodded. "I guess he has it coming, at that. Though I've no doubt he can prove readily enough he was not deliberately accepting rustled beef. My father is hard in his dealing when he feels called on to be so, but he's honest and above board, too. But that isn't what just seeped into my own thick skull."

"No? What did?" White did not seem overly anxious to hear about it.

"Yukon Shard had me jailed for a killing in his saloon here in town," Pete explained. "Shard's grown pretty strong here, controls just about everything except Rail-O and maybe the nesters out along the benchlands. He railroaded a conviction for murder onto me, though the killing was plain self-defense. Then, night before last, he hauled me out to one of the Mormon places to dig a bullet out of a man. On the way back to town he ordered Keener to gun me down! I've been wondering why he's so set against me."

"Why is he" asked White.

"Because I'm a vet," said Pete simply.

White gave him a long hard stare. Then he whistled softly between his teeth. "You mean he anticipated you'd be needed on the range—that he figured there'd be blackleg breaking out?"

"Yeah," growled Pete. "Sounds far-fetched, doesn't it? Maybe I'm dreaming! Maybe there's a simpler explanation—but that conniving gambling man sure as the devil wants me out of the running . . . and I can't see any other reason!"

They were close to the edge of town

now, and ahead of them lay the squat ugly buildings, gray and quiet in the dawn. The next moment there came the shattering sound of gun shots—one—two—three. A short break, while Pete and Ernie White sucked in their startled breaths—then several more sharp reports sounded.

"Mister," yelled Pete, "the war's on! I don't know where you're going—but I'm taking a closer look-see by some other route besides Manzanita Street!"

He kicked heels into the horse's flanks and headed for a shallow coulee that ran around the town. Once into it's comparative shelter Pete threw one look behind. The range detective was not in view, had apparently decided on some course of his own.

"Has his own chicken to cook," muttered Pete, while sharp wonder as to the exact meaning of those shots drummed through his mind. He had a pretty strong hunch that the Mormon nesters had waited out there as long as they cared to, had come to town maybe over old Bide's protests to open a scrap with Harry Benbow and his Rail-O crew.

Pete came up out of the draw, ducked between two unpainted shacks and cut around a sagging old barn. Three or four more gunshots gave him the direction, and he cut across a weedy lane toward the rear of some store buildings. As he ran he saw a few heads peering cautiously from windows here and there.

Pete got off his horse and tethered it to a sagging fence at the rear of Hogan's Hardware, and he sped between the hardware and the next false-fronted building. Suddenly he was driven back by a vicious hail of lead from buildings directly across the street. Pete ducked low and ran back to the rear again, and answering shots roared from within the hardware store.

Without bothering to think, Pete vaulted the fence and jumped for the rear door of Hogan's. There he paused for a brief second panting, and smiling ironically.

"Don't know which side I'm barging in on," he murmured, "but darned if I'm crossing that street right now!"

HE MOVED through a storeroom and into the back of the cluttered store. Several men were crouched in the shelter of a high ledge, peering cautiously outside. In the semi-gloom, while Pete tried to adjust his sight against the brighter light coming in through the large front windows, a step sounded beside him.

He whirled—but not before a gun muzzle was jammed hard against his side. "Where you goin', hombre!" snarled a hard-faced, lanky cowboy. Almost instantly the gun dropped.

"My God! Pete Benbow!"

Pete grinned into the cowboy's lean face. "Sure, Red. Dropped in to see what's happening. Where's Dad?"

The redheaded cowboy gestured toward the front with his pistol. "Yonder. We're tradin' lead with them nesters, Pete." Wonder showed in his face. "Heard you busted jail and left the country. Why'n hell didn't you?"

Pete shrugged. "Just a damn fool, I guess. This isn't my fight, but here I am, horning in." He swung to greet the burly, gray-haired man who now came back through the store.

"Mornin', Dad. Can't you wait till after breakfast to start your wars?"

Harry Benbow's granite-hard features twitched slightly. "Take my place up front, Red," he ordered the puncher.

He spread his feet wide and glared at Pete. "What're you doin' here?"

"Do you give one thin damn where I am or what I'm doing?" Pete said, aware now of the bitterness that was in him.

For a long minute Harry Benbow glared, then he abruptly let out a heavy sigh. He spoke again in softer tones. "Pete, you blasted pup, I'd never have

let them hang you for that killin'. There was nothin' I could do in Nolan's court, and besides I was mad as hell, still ranklin' at the way you squandered my money learnin' yourself to be a cow doctor."

"I was slated to swing—still am," Pete said. "What would you have done?"

"Broke the damn jail down. Gut-shot that coyote sheriff Shard put a badge on. Maybe some others things."

He spoke with sincerity, and Pete knew that Old Man Harry Benbow meant what he said. Then Pete remembered what had brought him back to Witch Creek.

"Dad, will your war keep for five minutes while I tell you some things?"

"It'll keep. Those crazy nesters come boilin' into town just before daybreak, while me and the boys were crawling out of our bunks at the hotel yonder. Claim they've taken enough off Rail-O. Claim Verne Ellenkamp's been shot in the back, and that Verne says a Rail-O rider did it."

"Then it's worse than I thought," Pete groaned. "I was hoping Verne'd name some Keener or Shard gunslick. Who did he pin it on?"

"Just said a Rail-O rider. My boys here say they don't know anything about it. Rest of 'em, except one, was on that trailin' chore."

"And that one?"

The old man shrugged impatiently. "Fella named Owens. Put him on at the ranch day before we left for Idaho. He's out with Gila River Joe and the herd now."

"Think he could have shot Verne?" Pete asked.

"How'n hell would I know? 'Fore I could even talk to the nesters, Bob Martin and one of the Mormons grew proddy and drawed on one another, no tellin' which drawed first. Both went down. They're still sprawled in the street out yonder. That busted it wide open. We holed up in here, Ellenkamp and his men 'crost the way, and there's no stopping it now."

"Where's Reb Keener and Yukon Shard?"

"Ain't got any idea." The old man's lip curled. "Most likely they're both hidin' someplace, pretendin' they've been took out of town on sudden business. Keener'll wait till the scrap's over, then come out and strut his weight around."

Pete nodded, then looked his father straight in the eyes. "Dad, get yourself set for a couple of belt blows. I've got a double load of bad news to hand you."

Harry Benbow's craggy features took on a puzzled look. Then he asked a shrewd question. "Where you been, Pete? Out to that trail herd?"

Pete nodded.

"There's somethin' wrong with some of those critters, ain't there? Lump-jaw, or something. I noticed it just beginning to show yesterday afternoon. That's why I had Joe hold 'em there on North Fork."

"Only it's worse than lumpjaw," Pete said. "It's blackleg."

The older man swore incredulously. "Hell you say! Can we stop it spreadin?"

"We can," Pete told him, "if there's no time wasted fighting a senseless range feud that's maybe worse than the blackleg. All right, that's part of it. Do you happen to know a gent named White? Ernie White?"

Harry Benbow scowled in thought, then jerked his bushy brows up. "Ernie White? I know him. Stock detective from Utah."

"Yeah," said Pete. "He's somewhere in this town right now, carrying a bench warrant for you."

"Bench warrant! What for?"

"For receiving stolen cattle. That herd you bought to spite your own ornery long nose has been rustled from two states—Utah and Idaho!"

Harry Benbow sagged back limply against a counter. He seemed to age before Pete's eyes, and for the first time in

his life Pete felt sorry for the kingpin boss of the Rail-O ranch. Finally the stockman jerked out a hoarse, "What'd I ought to do, Pete?"

"Looks to me," Pete told him bluntly, "like you got a whole flock of crow to eat, Dad. And the sooner you get at the chore, the quicker it'll be done."

As long as he lived, Pete Benbow would never forget the picture Old Man Harry Benbow made as he walked out into the middle of Manzanita Street carrying a big square white cloth.

Bide Ellenkamp walked out to meet him, and from inside the hardware store where he stood with the Rail-O punchers, Pete saw the two leaders confer. They talked for five minutes, Benbow standing there like a weather-hammered old oak tree—Ellenkamp tall and gaunt and grim. Then at a signal from both of them the other nesters walked out into the open, and Pete with the Rail-O punchers followed.

Harry Benbow told his own crew and the hard-faced nesters what he had just related to Ellenkamp. He finished with a twisted, mirthless grin.

"My son Pete told me I'd best eat crow—for the first time in my life. Well, I've done so. I'm in the wrong from hell to breakfast. I should have learned to get on with my neighbors and accept the changes that were bound to come to this old wide range. Instead I wanted to crowd everybody off the grass, and I've put myself way out on a rotten limb that'll most likely crack. Brought onto Witch Creek range a herd of stolen cows that're riddled with disease in the bargain. Take it from there, Pete, boy."

"Looks like I won't have to take it very far, Dad," Pete said drily, jerking a nod down the street. Nesters and punchers followed his quick glance.

"Shard and Reb Keener. Two deputies and a couple of strangers," Bide Ellenkamp muttered.

"One stranger is Ernie White," Pete told them.

"The other one, the fella with a lopsided nose and the mean eyes, is the gent I paid off in cash last night for eight hundred and twenty-one head of stolen beef," Harry Benbow growled.

"Benbow's due for arrest," said Ellenkamp. "So's the young cow doctor."

"Harry Benbow's got his coming," declared one nester flatly. "As for young Pete, he walked into this mainly to help us settlers. But I don't see that we can do anything to help him. He's court-convicted."

As the sheriff's party drew closer Pete suddenly grabbed Harry Benbow's arm in tight fingers. "Dad! How come the man you paid off is fool enough to show his face, much less ride with that law party?"

"It smells," admitted Benbow, shaking his gray mane. "Something dadburned queer about this whole business."

The approaching horsemen stopped in the middle of the street. Ernie White gave a crisp order. "Serve your warrant, Keener."

"Step forward, you two Benbow hellions," Reb Keener called. He sat his saddle with a rolling, swaggering motion. "I'm takin' you both."

Now Pete looked around the deserted streets, marveling at the cowardice of the local citizenry. Still afraid of wildly flung lead, not a soul showed his face. Then Pete looked at his father, surrounded by hostile nesters and his own watching, uncertain crew. Benbow was glaring at the detective from Utah.

And abruptly Harry Benbow roared out: "By thunder, I knew there was something fishy about this business! Mister—you there, claiming to be Ernie White! You're a damned imposter!"

PETE FROZE in his tracks, felt his muscle tense.

"Those cattle," Benbow continued.

"I've no doubt they were rustled from all over hell's half acre. Shard put me next to 'em, and I paid that ornery lookin' coyote there cash on the barrel head last night. Pete, if they get away with this now, it'll mean a bushwhack for us both later! *Only they ain't going to get away with it!*"

The man who had called himself Ernie White asked the gambler in a grating voice: "What'll it be, Shard? Benbow knows I'm not White."

"You fool!" Yukon Shard swore thinly, suddenly purple-faced with rage. "You didn't have to admit it right here in front of the whole damned crowd. Now—"

The gambler broke it off short and clawed for the ornate gun at his side.

Harry Benbow and Yukon Shard fired almost at once. The suave gambler lurched in the saddle, jerked both hands up tight against his chest and pitched headlong into the street. His horse skittered sideways with a squeal of fright that sent the other animals lurching against tight reins.

Reb Keener had drawn a saddle gun and began firing it before it was half raised, in a panicky manner that told of his cringing cowardice in a tight jam.

Pete had the ancient Frontier pistol out now, and he stood square in his tracks and shot Reb Keener from the saddle.

Other shots were barking on either hand, as cowboys and nesters got into the exchange of lethal lead. The man called Ernie White jumped from his saddle as a bullet struck his arm, shattering the bone. Scared of getting another deadly slug he hunched himself double and ran. From a corner of his eye Pete saw the masquerader stumble and fall as old Bide Ellenkamp calmly shot his legs from under him.

The hard-looking man who had delivered the stolen herd to Harry Benbow was already sprawled out on the ground when Pete glanced back. So was a Rail-O man, and one nester sat on the ground nursing a shattered hand. Harry Benbow turned slowly toward his son.

"Pete, let's get at that cow-doctorin'. I can get the money back I paid that ornery outlaw, and maybeso still buy that herd of steers from the rightful owners. And I'll stake every Mormon nester to fifty head apiece. With their profits after fattenin' they can pay me back."

OLD Bide faced Harry Benbow, with mingled emotions on his lined face. Suspicion still rode high. "You're talkin' right free, Benbow. But maybe you've forgot my Verne was shot in the back. Two hours 'fore daylight this mornin' he roused and whispered to Delia that it was a Rail-O rider who shot him. We still want an answer to that."

"You'll have it," Harry Benbow growled. "It was through no order of mine, Ellenkamp, that your boy was shot. I'm positive that rider I hired just before we left for Idaho was a Shard hireling. We'll know soon's we get out there to the herd, 'cause I'll damn soon wring it out of his hide. I can tell you now why Yukon Shard wanted to stir real trouble betwixt us. He wanted a war started that would get a lot of you Mormons killed. Then there'd be fewer for him to buck when he took over the Rail-O."

Pete stared at his father. "How could Shard get the Rail-O?"

Benbow laughed bitterly. "He held my note for ten thousand, that's how! He played a devious game, pretending he wanted me to have a chance to recoup by getting these cattle he'd heard about. All the time he was rigging things to stage this cockeyed arrest previous to a sure bushwhack. And it explains why he wanted rid of you, Pete. So's he'd have a clear field grabbin' the Rail-O."

A half hour later, when they had picked up the necessary tools and anti-toxins at Pete's little office, Bide Ellenkamp accompanied them on the ride to the trail-

herd, which Gila River Joe was managing to hold. Joe reported that only a few more head were so far showing the dread disease. When Joe had heard his story, the little foreman rode out to the herd and came back prodding a shaking ferret-eyed rider.

"Here's your back-shooter, Ellenkamp," Joe growled. "Says Shard paid him thirty dollars."

"I know the whole deal," whined the frightened rider. "Shard cooked it all up to get the Rail-O and a chance to hog this whole range. The cattle are sure-enough rustled from Utah and Idaho—only that fella claimin' to be White wasn't no detective. Him and the crooked-nosed gent was the rustler leaders from Idaho."

"I wonder," said Pete, as he removed his jacket and began preparing his equipment for the job of inoculation, "if that shooting charge against me is still air-tight. There were certainly several witnesses in the High-Hole saloon that never came forward at the trial to testify."

"They were scared of Shard," declared old Harry Benbow. "He had the whole town eating out of his hand. But I contacted those gents after the trial. Got declarations from every damn one with the straight story. We'll get you off, son."

Pete sucked some smoky liquid into a large hypodermic needle. He cocked a sidewise glance at Bide Ellenkamp. "When you get home, Bide, tell Delia I'll be around this evening for another look at Verne."

The old man's tired features relaxed their grim look. There was a ghost of a smile on his lips. "I'll tell her, young feller. Sure it's Verne you're interested in?"

"Ain't talking," said Pete, with a broad grin. He was feeling mighty good.

THE END

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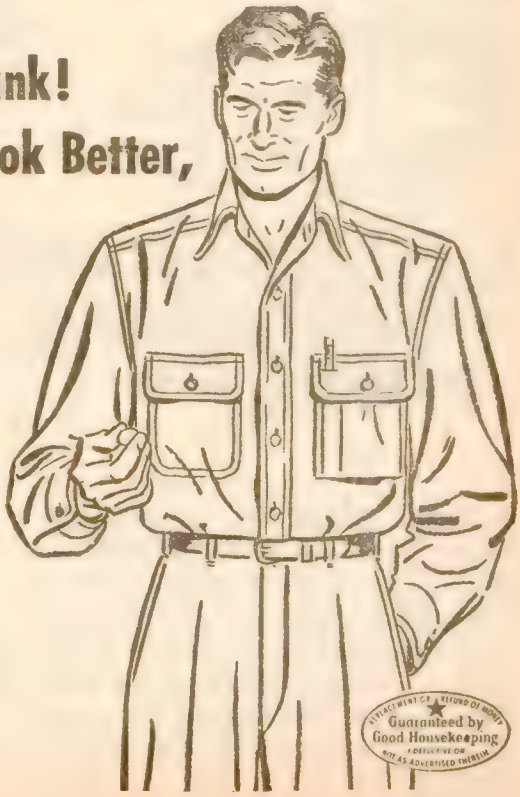

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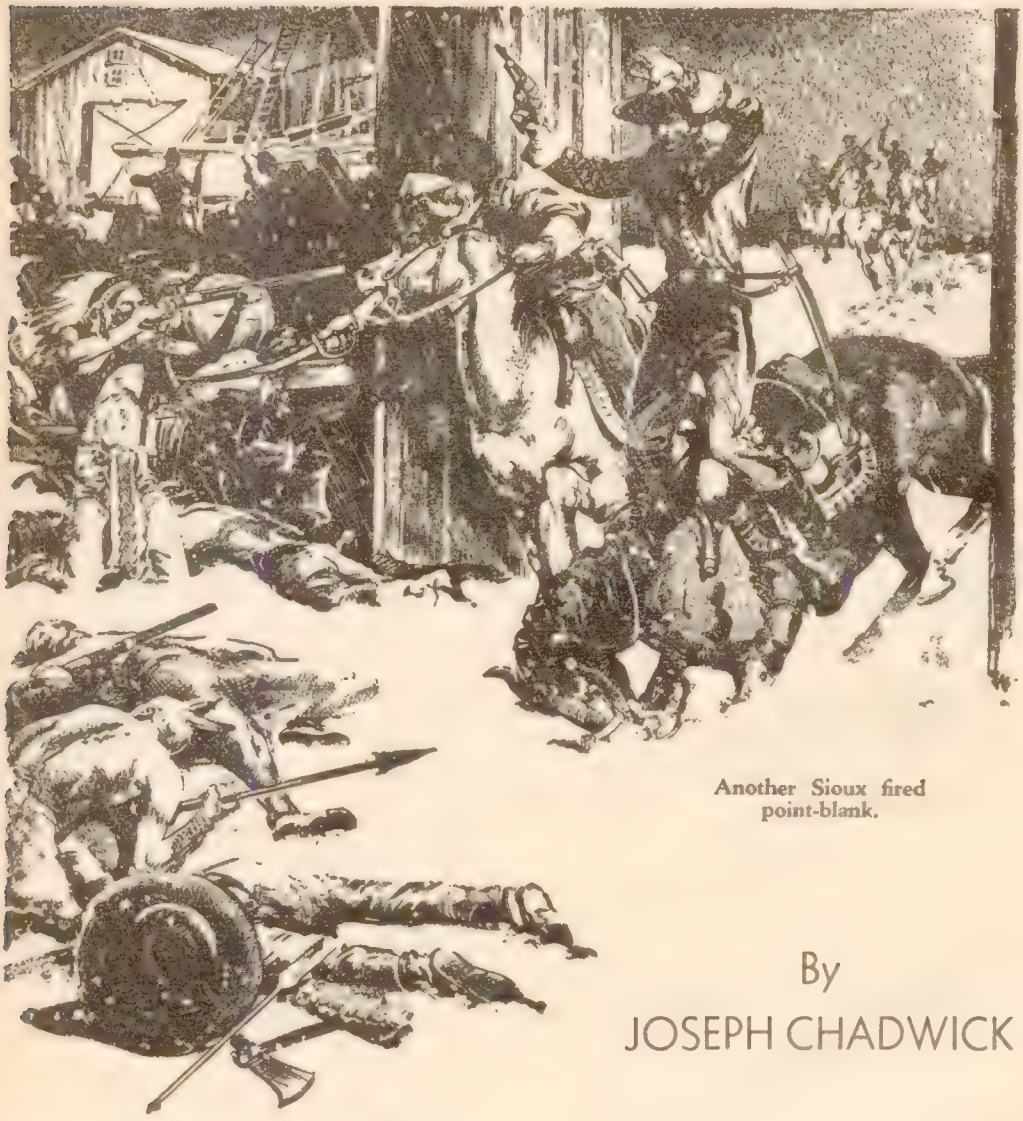


Another Sioux fired point-blank.

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Colonel LeStrange might still save Sanford and his doomed patrol from that death trap of screaming Sioux. . . . If he chose to leave Sanford's woman—the only woman LeStrange himself had ever wanted—to a far grimmer death!

ALONE in his bachelor quarters, the colonel poured and downed one stiff drink after another. The bottle was the gift of a fellow officer who had said, back at Leavenworth nine months ago, "Drinking man or not, you'll need it where you're going." It had been hidden away forgotten in the colonel's

chest until tonight, when he needed it.

But though not a drinking man, Colonel John LeStrange could hold his liquor. He was not so drunk that the officers and enlisted men serving under him would have detected the fact. His own striker might suspect, but a good dog-robber—and Corporal House was that—never talked. Nor was the colonel so drunk that his mind was numbed to the nightmare he lived. In fact, the whiskey did not help him forget it at all.

The wind howled outside, and its chill crept in through every crack in the plank walls. Sleet rattled against the window panes. The candle flame fluttered in the draft. The colonel shivered. A knock sounded at the door, and he gave a violent start.

He hastily placed bottle and glass on the chest, reached for his tunic on the bed, and said, "Come in." The door opened; Corporal House showed himself. "Lieutenant Newbridge, sir," the striker said, "with Sergeant Kilraine."

"Very well, Corporal. I won't need you anymore tonight."

As the striker withdrew, LeStrange finished buttoning up his tunic. He reached for his hat, stood lost in thought for a moment, then, coming ramrod straight, walked to the other room. Furnished as a parlor, warmed by a roaring fire, it was more comfortable. The two men waiting there came to attention, but LeStrange said, "At ease, gentlemen."

"You wanted to see Kilraine, sir," Lieutenant Newbridge said.

The colonel nodded. He was gray at the temples, his face was beginning to show deep lines. The lieutenant was sandy-haired, and his face was boyishly smooth. The sergeant,—neither middle aged nor young—was a man in his brief prime. He had a ruddy Irish face, humorous blue eyes, and bulging left cheek that hinted at a tobacco cud. Kilraine had been with LeStrange in the War between the States. Before that he'd been a coal miner in Pennsylvania, but he'd come to like soldering and hadn't returned to the pits. He made a good soldier.

"Lieutenant Newbridge gave you your orders, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Repeat them to me."

"Sorry, sir," said Kilraine. "But I'm to repeat them to nobody."

A faint smile touched LeStrange's stern mouth, and he thought, *Good man!* Aloud he said, "I had you brought here to my quarters so no one would overhear what was said, Sergeant. As Lieutenant Newbridge has told you, you're to be detailed to the powder magazine tonight. As an ex-miner, you know how to handle powder. That's one reason why I picked you for the detail. You're to set a charge and lay a fuse, so that the magazine can be blown up in the event that the fort is attacked and taken by the Sioux."

The sergeant's blue eyes blinked. He swallowed visibly, muttered, "Yes, sir."

LeStrange went on, "You will touch off that fuse, if hostiles get inside the stockade walls. You'll wait for no order to do so, for it's possible that there'll be no one to give you such an order. I expect to march out at midnight, with the bulk of the garrison, and Lieutenant Newbridge will be in command here. There will not be enough men here to hold off a determined attack, if that is the Sioux' plan. You understand, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

Lieutenant Newbridge coughed slightly. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I haven't told Kilraine why the magazine is to be blown up."

LeStrange nodded. He'd told the lieutenant that he himself would inform the sergeant, but now it was not easily done. He looked at Kilraine and suddenly realized that in this they could not be merely commanding officer and enlisted man. They were two equals with a soul-searing

task to perform. He said, "Pat, you know what happens to Sioux prisoners. You've seen the mutilated bodies—afterwards." He paused, seeing how the sergeant shuddered. "Tonight, when and if I march out, the post's women and children will be placed in the powder magazine," he said.

Kilraine swore under his breath; he was not a man who knew how to pray. Finally he said, "Sir, a man should be drunk to do the job you've given me."

LeStrange realized then that he'd left the bedroom door open, that Sergeant Kilraine could see, from where he stood, the bottle on the chest.

"Would one drink help, Pat?"

"Some, maybe."

LeStrange's nod gave him permission. The sergeant went into the other room, and the drink he took was not a small one. The colonel looked at the lieutenant, and asked, "You, Mister Newbridge?"

"No, thank you, sir."

They departed then, leaving LeStrange alone with his bleak thoughts. One of the women who would be in the powder magazine tonight—if it came to that, as it almost certainly would—was she whom the colonel loved. . . .

THERE were times when thinking could push a man toward madness, and this, LeStrange realized, was such an occasion. Waiting for midnight, the deadline he had set for himself, was nerve-racking. He needed action. Accordingly, he donned overcoat and hat and went out into the icy night.

It was but eight o'clock, but the Wyoming darkness was stygian. Fort Phil Kearny's scattered lights did little to dispel it. LeStrange's quarters stood first in a row of a dozen plank houses, the crude shelters all alike that made up Officers' Row. Here lived the families of the married officers, families who belonged anywhere but in the wilderness. Not the colonel, but the War Department, had given the officers permision to bring their families to this Godforsaken place.

So far as the War Department—and the Indian Bureau too—was concerned there was peace in the Powder River country. Yet men were dying almost every day, and the Sioux, with their allies, the Arapahoes and Cheyennes, had Fort Phil Kearny besieged most of the time since its building.

It was one of the finest frontier posts ever built. LeStrange was well aware of that, for he had been its draughtsman and engineer. He had done the best he could with what he had. Walking now through the sleety rain and howling wind, he felt a mild pride in what had been accomplished. The stockade walls rose high. Within them, in neat array, stood quarters, barracks, stables, hospital, storehouses, laundry. He passed the howitzers, orderly in a battery park. There was a bandstand and a high flagstaff on the parade ground. Sentries patrolled at the gates and on the wall . . . but all of this was not enough. The post could not serve its given purpose.

Kearney had been planned, built and garrisoned to guard the Bozeman Trail to Montana, to keep it open for wagon trains and cattle herds on their way to the mines. It was a total failure, for the Trail was a death march for all who ventured into the country. Red Cloud of the Sioux was carrying out his threat. More troops, especially cavalry, were needed. LeStrange had requisitioned, begged for breech loading rifles. Headquarters at Omaha had sent his requisitions on to Washington, but there were no reinforcements on the way and Kearny's soldiers were still armed with muzzle loading Springfields. And so too many men died, and tonight the post's women and children must be sent to the powder magazine.

LeStrange shuddered.

He looked back toward Officers' Row. The third house was that of Major Bert Adams the surgeon. Claire was staying

with the Adams family, her old friends.

A supply train had gotten in from Laramie just that afternoon—safely through because the Sioux had other bait to jump at. LeStrange had hoped the wagons were bringing the breech-loaders he needed so desperately. Instead, they had brought muzzle-loaders and powder and flour—and another woman to be worried about. Claire Hanley, in fact. The one woman LeStrange did not want at this perilous place.

He turned to headquarters building, entered and found Captain Len Mason on duty as Officer of the Day. "Still no courier from Sanford, Colonel," Mason said. He was a stout man of about forty. He had a fine wife and two well-behaved children, LeStrange reminded himself. "What do you suppose happened to him?"

LeStrange shook his head.

He hated to think of what might have befallen the brash Captain Sanford and his command. The detail had been sent out at two o'clock that afternoon to overtake and turn back an emigrant wagon train that had deliberately circled wide about the fort so as not to be refused permission to travel the Bozeman Trail. LeStrange had given Captain "Beau" Sanford orders to return by nightfall even if he failed to contact the wagon train. But Sanford was cocky. "Give me eighty cavalrymen," was his boast, "and I'll march through the whole Sioux nation!" By strange coincidence, there were just eighty troopers in Sanford's detail.

"Beau's too sure of himself," Mason growled. "He'll get himself massacred, yet. You marching out to find him, sir?"

"At midnight, as I planned. If there's still no word from him."

"There'll be no word. The Sioux won't let any couriers get through."

LeStrange nodded agreement to that, and said, "If there is a courier, send an orderly to my quarters at once. If there's none by eleven o'clock, follow through with the orders I gave you. I'll want the men ready to leave the sallyport promptly at midnight."

He caught Mason's nod, turned to the door.

Mason said, "It'd be hell, Beau getting himself killed just the day his fiancee arrives. Well, that's soldiering."

LeStrange kept on going, not wanting Mason to see the bleak look mention of Claire Hanley brought to his face. He leaned against the push of the wind, headed for his house, and the ice crunched under his boots. He stepped quickly into his quarters, forced the door closed against the pressure of the storm. He felt her presence before looking up and seeing her standing beside the blazing fireplace. Claire Hanley was as lovely as ever.

SHE had removed her cloak, laid it over a chair. She wore a dress of dark green velvet, the bodice form-fitting and the skirt full. There was a cameo brooch at her throat. Her hair was auburn, her eyes green-flecked. Her mouth was wide—a smiling mouth, a provocative one. She was in her middle thirties, and to many men—to John LeStrange certainly—her mature beauty was more desirable than that of a girl merely pretty with the bloom of her youth. LeStrange stared, foolishly perhaps, and his desire for Claire Hanley was a naked thing in his eyes.

He took one step toward her, and only one. Had he crossed to her, he would have taken her into his arms. "You shouldn't have come here," he said flatly.

"To Fort Phil Kearney—or to your quarters?"

"To either."

"Perhaps I could not stay away," she said, smiling faintly. "But even if Fort Phil Kearny is the most dangerous spot in the world just now I'm safe enough here—in your quarters.

"Beau Sanford wouldn't like it."

"Beau? Would he criticize another per-

son's conduct?" She smiled secretly.

LeStrange frowned. Had he not known her well, he would have believed that she was playing the flirt. He said, "Any man, no matter what his own conduct may be, is touchy about the behavior of the woman he plans to marry. Shall I see you back to Major Adam's quarters, Claire?"

She laughed, musically. "Always the gentleman, aren't you, John?" she said mockingly. "You wouldn't compromise a woman. But isn't it rather dull for you?" Abruptly she sobered. "John, you don't look yourself. You're unwell?"

LeStrange said that he was in good health. Seeing that she was determined to stay, he removed his hat and overcoat. His movements were slow, deliberately slow, for he needed a minute to brace himself. He'd always been unsure of himself in Claire's presence, and he'd known her for fifteen years. She'd been married to a fellow officer, Jeff Hanley, LeStrange's best friend. Hanley had been killed during the first year of the war, on a cavalry raid —and now LeStrange remembered, *I sent him out on that detail —a hopeless mission.*

He had felt responsible, almost with a sense of guilt, and that had kept him from courting Jeff Hanley's widow—as Sanford had done. LeStrange had been jolted on hearing that Sanford had proposed and been accepted, before he came to Kearney as a replacement six months ago. Not because Claire shouldn't marry again, after five years of widowhood, but because of the sort of man Beau Sanford was. A ladies' man. A handsome sort who'd left broken-hearted women behind whenever he was moved to a new post. But he was marrying Claire. A new leaf, perhaps . . . LeStrange faced her again. He had control of himself now, and dared join her by the fireplace.

"Sanford told us of his engagement to you," he said. "But he never spoke of your coming out here."

"He didn't know. I didn't write to him about my plans."

"You knew that he'd tell you to keep away, stay at Omaha."

"Did I, John?" Claire said oddly. She was silent a moment, watching him from under the fringe of her amazingly long eye lashes. Her breathing was fluttery, and LeStrange, without a direct look, could see the rise and fall of her bosom. "The officers at Fort Laramie warned me not to come," she told him. "But I came, John. I had to come. I'm not afraid, Army women can't afford to be afraid. Martha Adams told me how things are here. About Beau's detail not reporting by courier and about—"

"If I'd known that you were coming," LeStrange broke in, "I would have kept Sanford here." He turned away, began pacing to and fro. "My God, Claire! I've done the same thing twice to you!"

"YOU'RE afraid Beau won't get back," Claire said gently. "And you blame yourself for Jeff's death five years ago. No, John. You're not to blame. Tell me; if Jeff hadn't been under your orders when he was killed, would you have come to call on me?" She drew a sharp breath, and added, "To court me?"

"Why ask that?"

"It's important to me."

"What about Beau Sanford?"

Claire shrugged. "I've learned about Beau from other women, since our engagement," she said. "From a honkatonk girl in Omaha, for one. He was seeing her at the same time he was courting me." She made an impatient gesture, "But I didn't come to your quarters at the risk of my reputation to talk of Beau Sanford," she went on. "I want to talk about you, John."

LeStrange said thickly, "Sanford—" It came out like a gasp.

Claire crossed to the table, turned the lamp flame low. "An open fire is always cozier in a darkened room, John," she

said, in a whisper that stirred him.

She came slowly toward him. "You're marching out at midnight. You may not come back. We may not see each other again. And you've been in love with me a long time. I know. I used to see it hidden in your eyes. John, it's such a short time until midnight. . . ."

LeStrange silently cursed himself, as he would have cursed any man for taking another man's woman. But he took her into his arms.

The fire had burned low, was now but a bed of red-glowing embers. A gloved fist pounded the door, making it rattle, and an orderly bellowed, "Corporal, rouse the Colonel! There's a courier just in—from Sanford's detail!"

Corporal House, of course, was not there.

LeStrange himself went and opened, saying, "Tell Captain Mason I'll come to Headquarters at once." He closed the door even before the orderly turned away. He'd let rush in a frosty hell of wind and sleet, and Claire, huddling by the fireplace now, shivered. LeStrange looked at her briefly, a soldier now and not a lover. Then he moved briskly, donning overcoat and muffler and hat. Belting on his holstered muffler and saber, and striding back to the door.

"John. . . ." It came to him in a whisper. "John, I love you."

"And I you, Claire," he said chokingly.

"It's good to know, even if we never see each other again."

He nodded jerkily, wrenched the door open. He pulled it shut after him. Guilt gripped him, for he thought of Claire and himself and Beau Sanford all in one flash of thought. Then he was moving toward Headquarters building on the double, his mind looking ahead—trying to imagine what word the courier had brought.

The courier was with Captain Mason, a smooth-cheeked youth who had come to Kearny a rookie. But he was a soldier now, despite his eighteen years. There was no written dispatch. The courier was spilling it out to Len Mason . . . . The emigrant wagon train had been under attack when Sanford's detail came up with it, just before nightfall. The cavalry had tried to drive off the hostiles, but there had been swarms of them. The Sioux had poured down out of the hills, fifteen hundred of them—Captain Sanford had said to report. The detail's position was good and darkness, along with the storm, was a help. "Captain Sanford said to tell you, sir," the courier said, "that he can hold out until dawn—but no longer."

There was an empty look in the soldier's eyes suddenly. A crimson dripping from his left coat sleeve to the floor told its story. The courier was wounded, by Sioux lance, arrow or bullet. LeStrange shouted to the orderly room, and when a sergeant came said, "Help this man to the infirmary, and rouse Major Adams."

He turned to Captain Mason. "What's Sanford's position?"

"Lone Pine Creek, sir. It's twelve miles."

"Twelve. I'll make it by dawn, even with infantry."

"And the Sioux could come here in the meantime," Mason said. He was uneasy, and it was clear that he was thinking of his wife and children. "It's the fort they hate—the fort they really want. Red Cloud has sworn—"

LeStrange made an impatient gesture. He knew that Red Cloud had sworn to destroy Fort Phil Kearny, but it would be Crazy Horse, Red Cloud's fighting chief, who would be directing the battle. And Crazy Horse would be difficult to turn away from possible scalps. It was a gamble—risking the post against saving Sanford's command, or rather the survivors of Sanford's command. LeStrange's mind was made up; he'd made his decision hours ago and nothing, not even Claire, could make him change it.

CAVALRY trumpets sounded "Boots and Saddles," and cavalrymen led the march across parade to the sallyport. The ranks of infantrymen followed at the double. LaStrange paused to speak to Lieutenant Newbridge, saying merely, "To the last man, Mister Newbridge. The Sioux will have it that way, if they come."

He looked back, toward his quarters. The windows were dark, but Claire would still be there. He thought bleakly, *The powder magazine—Oh, God!* It was a prayer. He swung his Kentucky thoroughbred about, rode out with his column. There was only darkness and cold, wind and sleet, the crunching of ice under hoofs and boots. Men swore as they slipped and fell, and picked themselves up.

LeStrange silently cursed those gold-crazed emigrants for their fool-hardiness. He almost regretted that the wagon train had been sighted by that wood-cutting detail from Kearny. Had the caravan not been sighted on its furtive skirting of the post, the cost in lives would have been a much smaller one. And Fort Phil Kearny, with its women and children, would not be an under-manned pile of posts and planks. . . .LeStrange tried to blank such thoughts out of his mind.

He was tempted to send his cavalry ahead, but logic warned him against dividing his command. He was in enemy country, every step of the way, and the enemy outnumbered him ten to one—if the Sioux were in full force and had the Arapahoes and Cheyennes with them. It was a chance the colonel would have taken had his troops been better armed, but muzzle-loading Springfields had to be heavily concentrated. Only the officers were well armed, having equipped themselves with breech-loading Spencers or Henry repeating rifles out of their own funds. So LeStrange kept his column intact, and up at Lone Pine Creek men were dying because infantry could travel only at a heart-breakingly slow pace.

The column was still five miles from Lone Pine Creek when gunfire was heard. Excitement swept the ranks. Perhaps officers and men had clung to the hope that the hostiles would have withdrawn with the coming of full darkness. But the old belief that Indians would not fight at night was a lie. The Sioux had proved that time and again by sending raiding parties of bowmen up to the very walls of Kearny under cover of darkness. Captain Len Mason grunted, "For all his faults, Beau Sanford's a soldier—else he wouldn't have been able to hold on this long."

"How long will it take you to get the infantry up there, Mr. Mason?" LeStrange asked. "An hour? An hour and a half?"

"An hour and a half, sir."

"Maybe it'll be soon enough," said LeStrange. "I'm going ahead with the cavalry."

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, yet the colonel could justify it. The infantry would march faster when realizing that it was cut off from the cavalry. Too, the sudden reinforcement for Sanford's command would throw the hostiles into confusion for a brief time—despite the small number of the reinforcements. LeStrange barked his orders, and led the way on his sorrel thoroughbred.

Sixty men rode by fours behind him, and twenty of them were but mounted infantrymen, trained only to fight afoot. Shod hoofs pounded the ice-encrusted ground. Accoutrements rattled. The gunfire ahead grew louder, and finally LeStrange could see spurts of powder-flame. He motioned to the trumpeter, ordered, "Let them know we're coming!"

The stirring notes of the trumpet knifed through the chill night, reaching out to the besieged men as a promise of help, and to the Indians as a threat. Cavalrymen drew their sabers, mounted infantrymen cocked their rifles. Sanford's command was atop

a low wooded ridge. It had some cover up there. To the north of the ridge was the creek, and to the south a wide and empty flat. Yes; for all his faults as a man, Beau Sanford was a good soldier. LeStrange knew that he himself could have chosen no better spot to fight off attack.

The cavalry reached the near edge of the flat, and fanned out in one line abreast. No command of "Charge" was needed. Horses galloped forward. Riders braced themselves for the shock of impact. It came, but it did not reel them back.

Cavalry sabers clashed against Sioux lances. Muzzle-loaders blasted their one precious shot and—with no time to reload—were used as clubs. White men cursed and grunted, the Sioux uttered their war cry. The cavalry cut through the band, which was perhaps a hundred strong, leaving three fallen behind. They galloped across the flat, strewn thickly with warriors killed by Sanford's men. They slowed on climbing the slope. Above, the survivors of Sanford's command let out a rousing cheer.

THERE were thirty-one survivors out of eighty men. There were also seven men—seven out of twenty-four—from the wagon train. The wagons lay in charred ruins down by the creek, horses and animals dead in their harness. Many of the survivors were wounded, some badly. Captain Beau Sanford had a bloody bandage about his blond head. But he still looked cocky. He would always be the handsome, swaggering "Beau." A man of thirty-eight with the easy-going—no, reckless—nature of a youth of twenty. Beau Sanford was eternally boyish, and perhaps, LeStrange decided, that was what women liked in him.

"I was never so glad to see anyone, sir," he told LeStrange. He was reloading a Henry rifle. "But I'm worried about something queer that happened. If the hostiles had kept up their pressure, we'd have gone under. But about midnight, the bulk of them withdrew. I'd say that there's only about three hundred surrounding this spot now."

LeStrange almost groaned.

He knew what had happened, and there was nothing queer about it.

Crazy Horse was obeying Red Cloud, and the bulk of the Sioux warriors were now on their way south to attack the fort. Scouts had seen the soldiers march out, and they'd gotten word to Crazy Horse. The Sioux understood that if the fort could be taken and destroyed, the garrison now outside its wall could be wiped out at will.

LeStrange asked thickly, "Your horses, Captain?"

Beau Sanford replied, "I've more horses than men left, sir." He suddenly understood. "They've gone south—to attack the fort?"

"That's it. They slipped by the column somewhere along the trail," said LeStrange. "And they'll take Kearny unless we can get there while the garrison is still able to hold them off."

"We've got to get there, Colonel. The women and children—"

"And your fiancee, Mister Sanford."

"My fiancee? Claire—at Kearny?"

"She came in with a supply train that got in today from Laramie," LeStrange said flatly. "Mount your men, Mister Sanford. We'll break out of here."

They mounted even the badly wounded, and rode down from the ridge. They fought their way across the body-littered flat, cutting through a swarm of mounted Sioux. They broke clear, galloped on, and when they met Captain Mason's foot column, they left the more seriously wounded with the infantry and continued southward. Six of the wagon train members rode along, on cavalry mounts, and each of them was well-armed and willing to fight.

The miles were long, and some of the

men were straggling; some of the horses playing out. LeStrange's thoroughbred could stand the pace, and he had to fight down an impulse to ride on alone. Sanford kept up with him, there at the head of the column, being well-mounted on a rangy gray.

"They'll fire the place, once they're inside," Sanford said. "But I see no glow in the sky."

That was true. The sky was dark and sullen, still pouring out sleet. But LeStrange took little comfort from seeing no reflection of a fire. The Indians would loot before they touched off a fire. What LeStrange dreaded was the thunder of a powder blast—the destruction of the magazine. He was wild with the fear that it would come rumbling through the night.

THE sleet turned to snow. Sounds were muted, vision obscured. So much the better, LeStrange thought; the snow would give the column cover all the way to the fort. But it also kept the hard-riding men from knowing what was happening ahead. Sanford said finally, "If there was any firing, we'd hear it by now."

"Not through this snow," said LeStrange.

Another mile, and they heard the crash of gunfire. They heard Sioux, and perhaps Arapaho and Cheyenne, war cries.

LeStrange slowed the pace to permit the horses to blow. He curbed his impatience for perhaps ten minutes thus, out of necessity, then ordered the charge. The trumpet wailed, and the horsemen surged forward. The fanned-out column smashed through small bands of wariors—sabers striking. The stockade walls loomed through the murky whiteness, and Beau Sanford muttered, "They're scaling the wall! Some are inside!"

LeStrange revolver was blazing. He never slowed his sorrel, no matter how many Sioux were in the way. He had to reach a gate, get inside, and stop Sergeant Kilraine from setting off that blast! He came to a gate, saw that some of Lieutenant Newbridge's men still held it. LeStrange saw it swing open. He galloped through, Sanford and the others close behind. Shadowy figures closed in. Rifles cracked, and bowstrings twanged. But Sioux afoot were not the fighters they were when mounted, and too few of them had gotten over the stockade wall. A warrior jumped at LeStrange, knife upraised. The colonel clubbed down with his gun barrel. Another Sioux fired point-blank. The shot took LeStrange's sorrel through the head. The animal was dead before it hit the ground. LeStrange rolled clear.

"The powder magazine!" LeStrange yelled wildly. "Stop Kilraine!"

Sanford must have understood about the magazine. He swung away, and LeStrange lost sight of him as the battle swirled about himself. He fired the last load in his revolver, then drew his saber. He took a lance thrust through his left upper arm, downed the warrior behind it. A rifle ball creased his right temple. Suddenly a victorious yell rose from the riders about him. No Sioux remained alive inside the stockade. No more scaled the walls. The snowfall was a lashing blizzard now, and that was good. It would drive the Sioux back into the hills, and permit the infantry to reach the fort.

LeStrange leaned heavily upon his saber.

He was a colonel, and for dignity's sake could not join in the cheering. But he too felt a wild exuberance, that the blast had not come off. Beau Sanford had reached the magazine in time. Sergeant Kilraine had delayed lighting his fuse long enough. Only one thing tempered the colonel's silent rejoicing: thought of the men who had died tonight.

MAJOR Adams was busy with the seriously wounded, so LeStrange had a hospital steward dress his wounds. He

was not seriously injured; the loss of blood had not weakened him to any great extent. He went to Headquarters from the infirmary, heard Lieutenant Newbridge's report and complimented the young officer on the way he had handled the defense. He said, "The Sioux won't be back in this blizzard, but have the sentries keep a sharp lookout for Captain Mason's command. It should be in within an hour.

He went out, fought his way through the storm to his own quarters. Windows along Officers' Row showed lights. The women and children were back in their houses, none the wiser.

He entered his house, and a fire was blazing on the hearth. Claire stood by the fireplace, almost as though she belonged there. LeStrange felt a wrench at his heart. He stiffened his resolve, and said, "Beau is safe. He's here at the fort."

"And you're safe, John," Claire whispered.

"Enough of that," he said flatly. "You belong to Sanford."

"So I told the officers at Laramie," Claire said, with a faint smile. "I told them I was coming here to marry Beau Sanford. It was the only way I could get permission to come."

A knock sounded, and he said, "Come in."

Beau Sanford entered, slamming the door shut again and brushing snow off himself. He looked across at Claire, uncertainly, then saluted, and said, "I went to the powder magazine as you ordered, sir. I found the man on detail there—Sergeant Kilraine—dead drunk. There was an empty bottle beside him. I managed to rouse him, and he claims that he got the whiskey from your quarters, Colonel. I've had him thrown into the guardhouse and—"

"You'll release him when he's sober, Mister Sanford."

"Release him, sir?"

"That bottle came from my quarters," said LeStrange, smiling thinly. "The sergeant must have come here and—well, helped himself." He saw astonishment spreading over Beau Sanford's handsome face, and was more amused. "And it's quite all right, under the circumstances."

"Under the circumstances, sir?"

"Exactly," LeStrange replied. "If Kilraine hadn't gotten that bottle, he'd have stayed sober and carried out his orders. And his orders, Mister Sanford, were. . . . Well, you're soldier enough to figure it out." Comprehension was coming to Sanford when LeStrange added, "Now I think you'll want to be alone with your fiancee."

Sanford glanced at Claire. "I'm a vain man," he said. "I hated to admit that I'd been thrown over by a woman, so I never mentioned that you broke off our engagement by letter more than a month ago." He looked back at LeStrange. "The lady is here because of another man, sir," he said, smiling. "One who has fewer feminine interests than myself."

He saluted, took his leave.

There was a long silence between LeStrange and Claire, then she said, "I tried to tell you twice, John—once when the orderly summoned you to Headquarters and again just before Beau came. Beau isn't hurt. He knows there are plenty of other women who'll be fascinated by him, as I was for a little while. He courted me at a time when I was sick with loneliness. With a loneliness for you, darling."

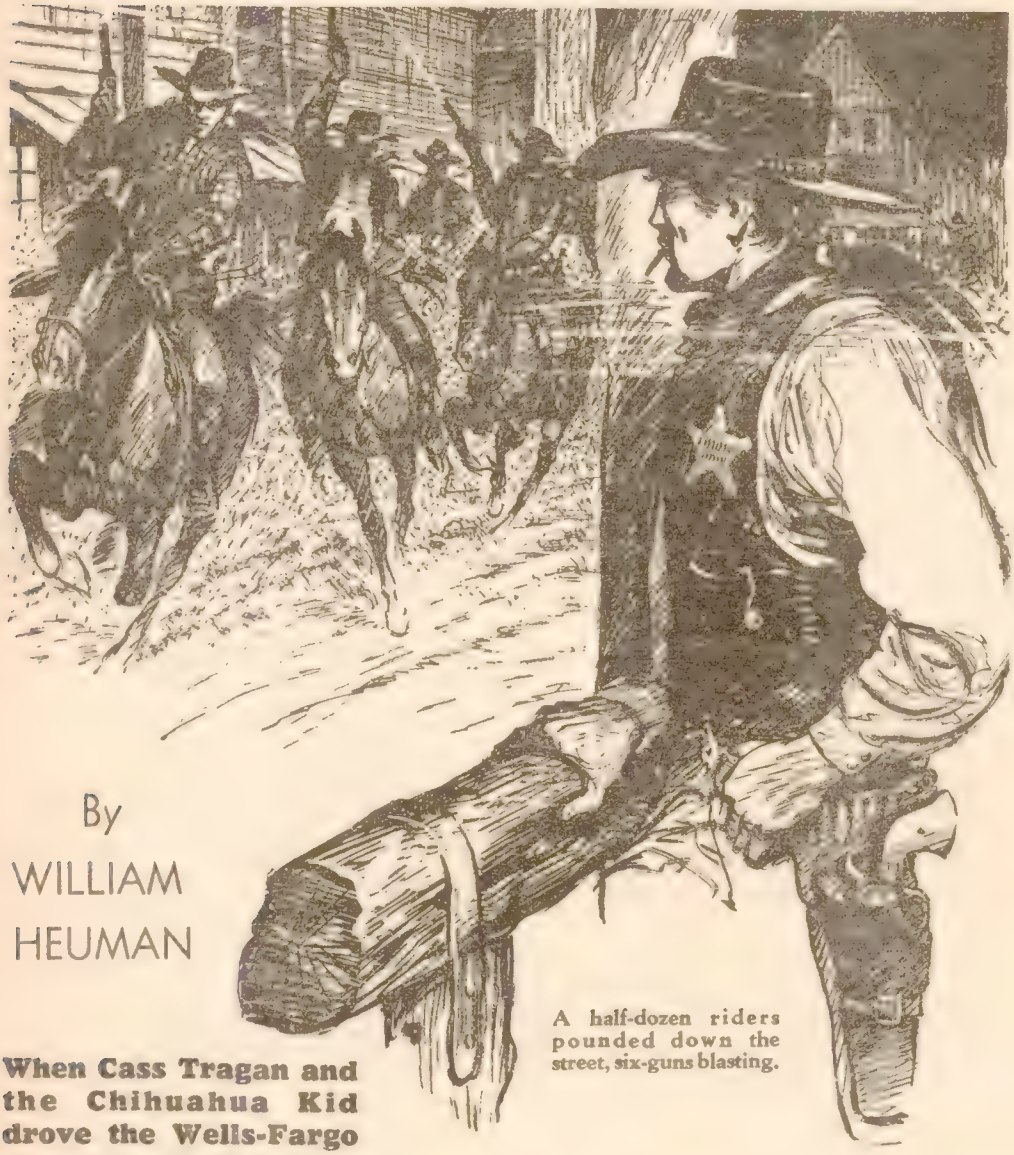
"The chaplain will hold burial services tomorrow," LeStrange said.

"Our marriage can wait for a more proper time, John."

LeStrange nodded. His stern face was smiling. His mood was more cheerful, and he told him, *My luck is changing—maybe Kearny's luck, too.* He stepped to the table, turned the lamp's flame low.

"An open fire is cozier in a darkened room," he reminded Claire.

THE WEARING OF THE STAR



A half-dozen riders pounded down the street, six-guns blasting.

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

When Cass Tragan and the Chihuahua Kid drove the Wells-Fargo stage into Buffalo City, it was sure sign, Chaney Jackson knew, that his bitter owlhoot years were over. For he'd dance from hemp tomorrow—if a slug from the Kid's Sharps didn't puncture his brand-new star tonight!

THE badge felt big on his chest, and it gleamed brightly in the light of burning kerosene flares in front of the saloons and gambling houses. Chaney Jackson, marshal for the night in tough Buffalo City, reached up with his right hand twice to touch it. It was

smooth, hard, cold—this star he'd hated and avoided for more than half of his thirty-three years, yet tonight he was wearing it, representing law and order in Buffalo City!

The night was young, a little after seven o'clock, and there were some kids standing outside the Pioneer Saloon, watching him come up. He could see their faces in the reddish glare of the flares which burned here; he could see the admiration, the respect in their eyes; and it meant something to a man who never in his life had been admired or respected.

Riders were coming in from the open range where the thousands upon thousands of Texas longhorns were bedded down for the night. Riding east three days before, Chaney had crossed the paths of some of these big trail herds, and he'd eaten at their chuck wagons. He'd looked into the eyes of the tough Texans who snaked the big herds north. They were red eyes, wild eyes, the eyes of men who had not seen a drink or a woman or a town in months. When they hit Buffalo City, the railroad's terminus, they were ready to explode. They had to be handled with kid gloves.

Marshal George Brackett had passed this information on to Chaney as the tall, gray-haired man lay on his bed, a bullet through his leg, and lines of pain around the corners of his mouth.

Chaney had come in on the ruckus with a pair of drunken renegade Mexicians, with Brackett down on the floor, grinning as he dropped one with a shot from his Colt .45.

Chaney had gotten the other one as he was about to put a bullet through Brackett's back. He'd shot from the far end of the bar; he'd shot coolly, carefully with the intent to kill because the man fully intended to kill Brackett and would have kept on shooting if he'd only been wounded.

"These Texans are tough," Brackett had stated, "but they're not vicious. They want fun more than trouble. If one of 'em tries to throw too big a loop, you knock him down with the barrel of your gun and lock him up for the night. He'll cool off and he'll be all right in the morning."

George Brackett had asked him to wear the star the next night because a town like Buffalo City couldn't be without law and order for even twenty-four hours. A crooked element had been creeping into the town since it had started to boom, and an iron hand was needed beneath the kid glove.

Astounded, and then somewhat amused, Chaney had accepted the offer. He was a stranger in this town, and Marshal George Brackett was accepting him at face value, asking no questions concerning his past. He'd said his name was Benson, and the lawman had accepted it as the truth. Brackett didn't know that he, together with the golden-haired, blue-eyed Cass Tragan, and the small, brown, bland Chihuahua Kid, was wanted on the charge of holding up an Arizona treasure coach and killing the driver and messenger. The Kid, with the quick gun, had done the killing because the Kid didn't want any man alive who could testify against him in a court of law and possibly put a rope around his neck.

Chaney had learned about the killings later. He'd ridden off with Tragan, carrying the heavy treasure chests, and the Kid had lingered behind. They'd heard two shots, and the Kid had informed them he'd shot two horses to prevent the stage from getting to the next town and spreading the alarm too quickly.

A month later they'd discovered that those two shots had dispatched the unarmed driver and the messenger after the hold-up. Tragan had laughed because he'd always laughed, and had other killings of a similar nature to his credit.

Chaney had knocked the Kid down with a blow of his fist and ridden off after taking the bullets out of the Kid's gun.

He'd been involved in other shooting scrapes in the years he'd run loose on the border, but the shooting of disarmed men had turned his stomach. The huge haul they'd been supposed to make on the treasure coach had materialized into nothing. They'd found wet sand in the chests instead of gold dust, while the real treasure coach was heading west over a different route.

Twenty-four hours before, Chaney had ridden into Buffalo City broke; tonight he was earning fifty dollars for wearing the star, and George Brackett assured him it was worth it. That five-pointed star was the target of every bushwacker's gun along Texas Street, main thoroughfare. The disorderly element of the town concentrated upon putting the marshal out of the way before they attempted foul play. . . .

THE star felt big and it felt funny, and it did something to a man. Chaney Jackson tried to figure it out. Never in his life had he had any responsibility, but tonight he was responsible for a town. The decent citizens town depended upon him for protection against lawless men—like himself. Chaney thought about that, and it was funny. He went down the street grinning, watching the riders coming in, looking at the horses jamming the tie racks in front of every saloon and gambling house.

The tough Texans watched him coming, sized him up, noticing the big Colt gun on his right hip, the worn leather holster, the smooth butt of the gun. They spat in the road, but there was respect in their eyes.

An early drunk lurched out of the Longhorn Saloon, pulled up in front of a passerby, and stood there, rocking gently, not sure himself what he intended to do, a silly grin on his face.

Chaney caught him by the shoulder, turned him around, and asked softly, "Which way you headin', friend?"

The drunk moistened his lips, muttered something incomprehensible, and went on his way, aided by Chaney's gentle push. The Buffalo City townsman nodded his thanks to Chaney.

Chaney moved on, feeling a kind of lightness in his soul. He pulled up at the next corner and stood on the edge of the boardwalk, watching a half dozen riders pounding down the street, six-guns blasting aloft, the night filling with sound.

The riders swerved in close to him, one man coming so close that his boot brushed Chaney's shirt. They had seen the star gleaming on his chest and they were testing him.

Chaney stood there, smiling a little, hands in his back pockets, making no move to get back. The Texans continued on their way, but the firing died down. They were wasting ammunition, making a lot of noise, but harming no one. According to George Brackett that was all right.

Chaney rolled a cigarette and put it in his mouth. He was touching a match to it when he heard the night stage coming in. The big coach lurched around a corner and bore down toward him. Two men were up on the seat, one had a Sharps rifle across his knees; the driver was smoking a cigar, its red butt glowing in the darkness.

The stage rolled out into the reddish light from the flares in front of the Longhorn Saloon, and headed toward the Wells-Fargo Express Office.

Chaney Jackson stiffened, the cigarette nearly slipping from his mouth. The tall man, holding the reins, smoking the cigar, was Cass Tragan. The smaller man with the Sharps rifle was the Chihuahua Kid.

Tragan spotted him at the edge of the walk, and he nearly lost control of his horses as he stared at the star on Chaney's chest.

Chaney remained where he was, puffing on the cigarette, staring straight ahead of him, a frown on his face. He turned his head slightly and watched Tragan step down from the coach and enter the office. The Kid stayed outside, a small, slim figure, walking cat-like, looking down in Chaney's direction.

Leisurely, Chaney moved up that way, crossing the road, coming up behind the coach. The Kid stood on the little porch outside the office, watching him, saying nothing. Chaney could see he Kid's yellowish eyes in the dim light—could see the hate in them.

The Kid was part Mexican, part Indian, part white, and all devil, and the Kid would never in this world forget or forgive that blow with the fist.

Chaney didn't even bother to talk with him. He let the Kid have a look at the star on his chest, and then he entered the Emperor Saloon a few steps down the street, knowing that the Kid would pass this information on to Tragan, and that Tragan would look him up.

A bartender in the Emperor said, "Drinks on the house for the marshal."

Chaney nodded his thanks. He stood at the far end of the bar and poured himself a drink from the bottle the bartender stood in front of him. He didn't drink the liquor. He stood there, looking down into the glass, trying to figure the thing out. Wells-Fargo Express Company didn't hire drivers or express messengers without first looking into the character of their men. The big coaches often-times carried gold shipments and they wanted dependable men to handle them.

Tragan and the Kid up on the seat of this big coach meant trouble of some kind. There had been no passengers in the coach, which meant that it could have been a treasure coach; a fast express carrying only gold and cash. What Tragan and the Kid were doing on it was a mystery.

CASS TRAGAN came in ten minutes later. Chaney spotted him in the bar mirror—tall, handsome, golden-brown hair, light blue eyes—looking ten years younger than he actually was.

Tragan sauntered over, poured himself a drink from Chaney's bottle, and then turned with the glass in his hand. He looked down at the star on Chaney's vest and he grinned. He didn't say anything.

Chaney put his glass down and stepped outside on the porch. He was standing there, alone, when Tragan came out, wiping his lips, moving up beside him.

"So you're on the other side now," Tragan said softly.

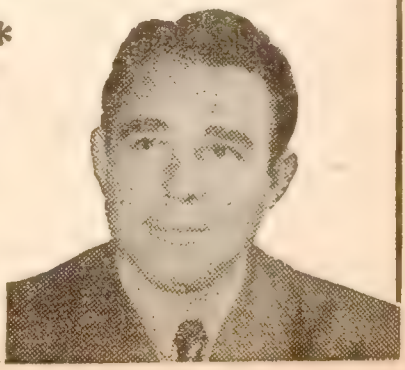
The Kid was coming up the walk, stepping lightly, a cigarette in his mouth. He pulled up a few feet away and stood there, looking at the two. Chaney said tersely. "Get that dog away, Cass. I

Edward Mann*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert makes a lighter highball

*of 1522 Kelton Ave., W. Los Angeles, Calif.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City



can kill him now—and do it legally."

Cass Tragan chuckled. He said, "Kid," and the Kid walked on.

"What are you doing?" Chaney asked, "driving a Wells-Fargo coach?"

"I like horses," Tragan said.

Chaney tossed his cigarette out into the dust of the road and watched it splutter out. He said, "You'll get wet sand again, Tragan. Only a fool bucks Wells-Fargo."

Tragan grinned. "You reformed?" he asked. "Or hidin' behind that star?"

"I never hide," Chaney said. "What are you after?"

"What I'm always after," Tragan told him. "Gold. You might come in handy with that tin star on your vest. We'll split it three ways—forty thousand dollars worth."

Chaney was beginning to see the picture. It was not a pretty one. He said slowly, "Where did you leave the real driver and messenger?"

Cass Tragan laughed. "You ask a damned lot of questions, Chaney. We dumped them off a dozen miles back in the brush."

"With bullets in their backs?" Chaney asked grimly.

Tragan spat. "Everybody dies, Chaney. You in this?"

"Tonight," Chaney answered "I'm the law in this town."

"Don't pull any law on me," Cass Tragan told him thinly. "I can have you hanged by sayin' one word."

"You won't say it," Chaney said.

"Stop my play here," Tragan grinned, "and you'll find out." He sauntered off, picking up the Kid at the next corner. They entered another saloon.

Chaney stood there, hands in his pockets, telling himself he was a fool to be concerned about this. Within a day or so Marshal George Brackett would be back on the job and he'd be drifting again. The two dead men who'd handled the Wells-Fargo coach headed for Buffalo City couldn't be helped now. He had his own neck to look after because nobody had ever looked after it for him.

There was a fight going on inside the Red Hat Saloon directly across the way. Chaney heard the sudden whoops and he could see the contestants over the top of the bat-wing doors, rushing each other back and forth, aiming tremendous, drunken blows with their fists.

For one moment he watched as he'd always watched, with no concern, and then he remembered that it was his job to preserve the peace tonight. He moved across the road with long strides, pushing through the doors. The crowd made a path for him.

He was bigger than either of the two fighters, and he was sober. Stepping between them, he grasped each man by the shirt front, jerked them apart and held them there, cursing, struggling ineffectually to break loose. He waited until they'd calmed down a little, and then he said, "Reckon that'll be all, boys."

It was the way he said it, the note of authority in his voice. The two fighters relaxed and he let them go. He said, "Have another drink, boys, and shake hands."

The crowd was grinning now, and a man sitting up on the bar yelled, "That's the way, Marshal. Treat 'em nice."

Chaney pushed back toward the door. A man slapped his shoulder as he went out, and he grimaced twistedly. It was a strange thing to have a man slap your shoulder in a friendly way. Chaney Jackson didn't remember the last time that had happened.

HE WENT up the street, passing the Wells-Fargo office again, and he turned up the side street which led to George Brackett's little house. He found the marshal sitting in a chair, his leg on a stool. The wound had not been too bad—a flesh wound, missing the bone.

Brackett was a man in his fifties, tall, heavy in the shoulders, long jawed. He grinned when Chaney came in and he said, "Need any help, Marshal?"

Chaney scratched his jaw. He waited until Mrs. Brackett left the room. "Any gold leaving Buffalo City tonight?" he asked.

Brackett looked at him quickly. He took a cigar from the box and lighted it. He said, "Treasure coach leaves the Wells-Fargo yards every last Thursday of the month. Tom Foley, the express agent, tells me she'll be carrying forty thousand gold and cash tonight, headed up toward Dodge City and then points east."

"What about the drivers?" Chaney wanted to know. "Wells-Fargo trust them?"

Brackett nodded. "Agent back in Bristow wired Tom Foley he was sendin' up two new men with this coach—two of the toughest, most dependable boys he could find."

Chaney Jackson rubbed his hands on his knees, and he wondered vaguely how Cass Tragan had gotten wind that a new driver and messenger were going out with the gold coach—men who wouldn't be known to the agent in Buffalo City.

"Needn't worry about this coach tonight," Brackett said coolly. "Reckon I'll be going out with it, Benson, if I can get you to stay on a few more days. I want to run up to Dodge and have Doc Clabaugh take a look at an old bullet hole. He might work on this scratch a bit, too, while I'm there."

Chaney stared at the man. He said slowly, "You're riding out on the night stage?"

The big man nodded. "Tom Foley kind of likes the idea," he grinned. "Extra protection in case somebody does get the notion to stop it. Reckon I can handle a gun just as well with this bad leg as without it."

Chaney moistened his lips. He said, "Reckon that's so. When do you pull out?"

"Eleven o'clock," Brackett told him. "I'd sure appreciate you're staying on another three days, Benson. Wanted to get this old bullet hole looked after a long while back. Couldn't get anybody to take over."

Chaney nodded. "I'll stay on," he said, and he had a picture of George Brackett riding out with Tragan and the Kid, and then of Brackett lying in the brush, a bullet in his back, and the two skipping with the Wells-Fargo treasure chests. He started toward the door and Brackett called after him. "Watch these punchers after midnight, Benson. They get pretty tough when they're loaded. Give 'em room, but don't let 'em push you around."

"They won't," Chaney smiled. He went out and he stood in the darkness outside the little house. He heard Mrs. Brackett come back into the room, and he heard her laugh. He walked on then and he wasn't smiling any more.

In front of the Longhorn Saloon he spotted Tragan and the Kid sitting in wicker chairs on the porch, boots up on the railing, watching him as he went past.

Tragan spat over the rail, and his soft, musical laugh followed Chaney down the street. The town was crowding up now; the walks were jammed with men going both ways, some of them with eyes already glazed.

Chaney took the gun away from a young puncher at the corner of Fremonte and Lane Streets. The kid, wild-eyed, full of bad whiskey, had his six-shooter out and was standing on the corner, waving it, shouting. He was about seventeen years old.

In the Alhambra Dance Hall an hour later, Chaney rapped the barrel of his Colt across the thick skull of a redheaded man who was getting rough with one of the percentage girls. The redhead collapsed, and Chaney had two men carry

him to the jailhouse where he was stowed away for the night.

IT WAS after ten o'clock when he turned the key in the cell and went back on the street. Punchers were riding up and down, banging their guns for the sheer enjoyment of the thing. Dust lay heavy in the humid night air. The glare of the red flares outside saloons and gambling houses gave the town an eerie, unholy appearance.

Chaney walked through the streets, hat pulled low over his eyes, hands swinging at his sides, the five-pointed star glittering in the reddish light, and he felt good. But far back in his mind was the knowledge that he had to make a decision.

George Brackett was going to die tonight unless he made a move, and the first move he made would put the law on his tail again. There would be a noose around his neck if he were caught.

He saw the Wells-Fargo night stage being made up in front of the station. The Chihuahua Kid sat up on the seat, smoking a Mexican cigarette, boots dangling over the side. Cass Tragan was inside, talking with the agent. The golden-haired man was a good talker, and he gave a good impression. Those mild blue eyes and the handsome features made men trust him, to their later regret.

Chaney pulled up in a darkened doorway farther down the street and he lighted a cigarette. He watched two men come out of the office with the treasure chest and bolt it to the floor of the stage. They had fresh horses in the traces, and the horses were anxious to go.

In ten minutes George Brackett came down, leaning on the shoulder of a friend, limping. He climbed into the coach and sat down. Chaney looked at his half-smoked cigarette and then threw it out in the road. Cass Tragan was coming out of the Wells-Fargo office, followed by the agent.

Chaney stepped out of the doorway and started up the street. He saw Tragan stop to look at him; at the star shining on his vest. Then Tragan climbed to the seat. The Kid sat beside him, the Sharps rifle across his knees.

As Chaney came up, the Kid shifted the rifle so that the muzzle was facing Chaney on the walk. Tragan held the reins with his left hand, and his right hung down near the butt of the sixgun on his hip. Tragan was grinning. He called down to George Brackett inside.

"Ready to go Marshal?"

"Roll her out," Brackett yelled.

"Hold it," Chaney said.

Foley, the Wells-Fargo agent, looked surprised. He stood on the walk just outside the door, a small man with sand-colored hair and a light mustache. He said, "Trouble, Benson?"

Chaney shifted away from the man, getting him out of the line of fire, and he noticed that the Kid's big Sharps gun followed him. Chaney said softly, "Get down, Tragan."

Tragan's eyes were concealed beneath the rim of his flat-crowned sombrero, but Chaney could see the lower portions of his face. The blond man's mouth tightened up. He didn't say anything. He waited it out, giving Chaney a chance to change his mind again.

Chaney was watching the muzzle of that Sharps buffalo gun, remembering the sight of a man he'd seen hit in the stomach from a charge from one of those heavy-calibre weapons.

Coolly, carefully, Chaney figured his play, weighing his chances. They were not too good. He wasn't afraid of Tragan, confident that he could match the blond man's draw if it came to a showdown, but the Kid and that Sharps gun was another matter. The Kid was very anxious to use that gun.

Foley said again, "What's the trouble, boys?"

Chaney looked for George Brackett, but the big man didn't show his head at the window, and he wasn't sure Brackett had heard what was going on outside. Taking a deep breath, boots braced on the walk, Chaney said quietly, "These two boys are wanted on a murder charge, Foley. They killed the real driver and messenger."

HE JUMPED then, to avoid the charge from the Sharps. He saw Tragan's hand snaking down toward his gun, and he was reaching for his own when a sixgun banged from inside the coach.

The slug tore through the roof of the Concord, grazing the Chihuahua Kid, startling him so that his shot from the Sharps went wild.

Tragan's gun was out in the clear, the blond man's right hand moving with incredible speed. Chaney's gun spit flame, the roar of it blending with Tragan's. He was hit somewhere on the left side, spun around, and he was numb as he dropped to the walk, still shooting.

The tall man wavered a little, his head down on his chest.

The Chihuahua Kid was clawing at his sixgun, dropping the Sharps' rifle when Chaney's bullet hit him in the stomach. The Kid got his gun out into the clear, lifted it into the air, and then plunged from the high seat, his body striking the dust of the road with a sickening thud.

Chaney saw George Brackett then, his head out the window, a sixgun in his hand. He'd been ready to send his bullet into the Kid when Chaney's own slug went home.

Cass Tragan slumped back on the seat, his hat falling from his head. He sat there for a long moment like a man who was very tired, and then fell backward.

Sitting on the walk, Chaney watched Brackett getting out of the coach. Tom Foley helped him and then came over to Chaney. He said anxiously, "They get you, Marshal?"

Chaney felt the wound now—not too bad—in the left side. He sat there, watching Brackett who was leaning over the tie rail, looking down at him. Brackett said to Tom Foley, "Rustle up a doctor, Tom. Take him up to my place."

The crowd was beginning to gather now, but Brackett spoke before they got up close enough to hear.

"Reckon you kind of spotted them two, didn't you, Benson?" he grinned.

Chaney moistened his lips. He said slowly, "You knew them?"

Brackett nodded. "I knew the driver and the messenger being sent up from Barstow. Knew 'em damned well, and when Foley told me about these boys I figured something had happened."

Chaney didn't say anything, and Brackett went on easily, "When I saw 'em up on the seat tonight I recognized both of 'em. Have their poster in the desk in my office. Tragan, the Kid, are wanted on a murder charge in Arizona. They've settled up."

Chaney nodded, and he waited for the rest, knowing very well that Brackett had recognized him, too, the first day he'd ridden into Buffalo City. He'd seen one of these posters, and the likeness of himself was very good.

"There was another chap," George Brackett said softly, "feller by the name of Jackson. . . ."

Chaney found his voice. He spoke quietly. "What happened to him?"

"Heard he was shot and killed in a saloon up in Dodge," Brackett said calmly. "Now you want to wear that star permanently? I need a deputy."

Chaney Jackson reached up with his hand and he touched it—a piece of cold metal with five points, very smooth, very shiny. He said softly, "I'll kill the man who tries to take it off."

THROUGH HELL TO

CHAPTER ONE

Stoves and Death for Santa Fe

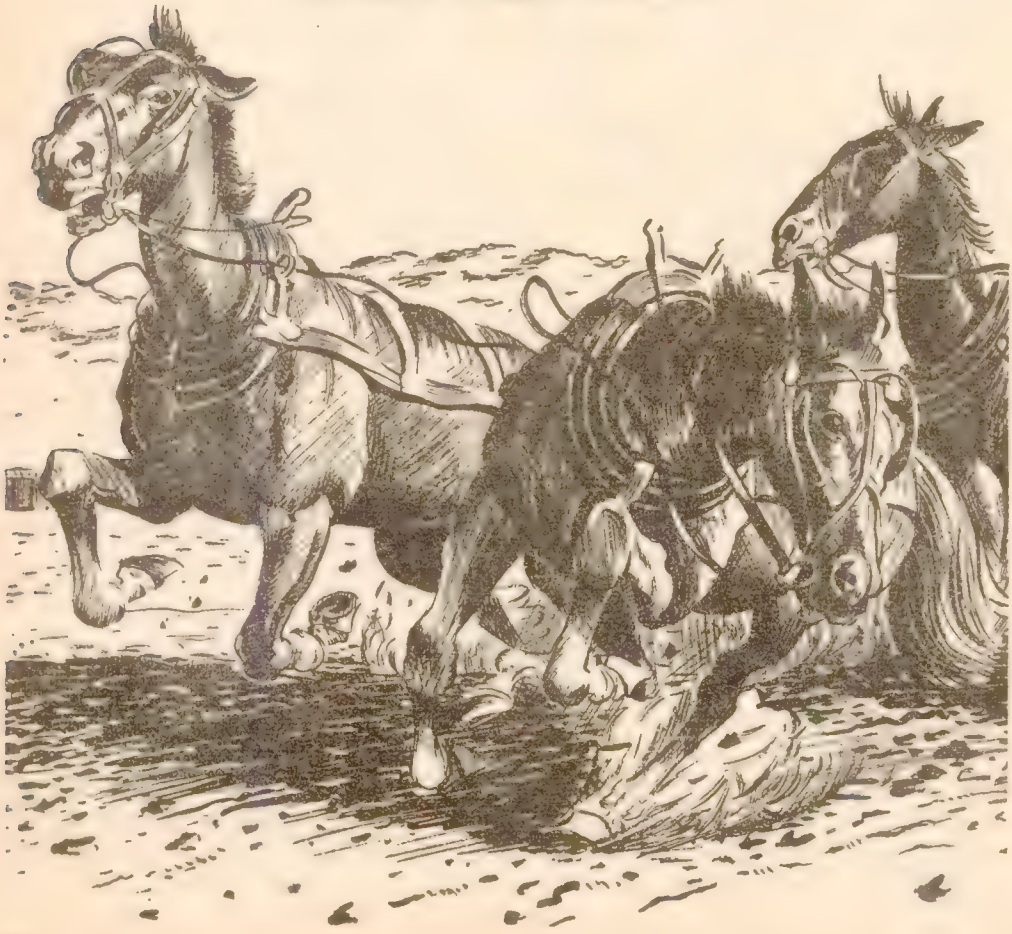
A DREAD cry came winging forward from the rear of the wagon train—a cry that none of them had heard before on this long trek from Independence across the grim reaches of the *Jornada del Muerte.*

"Fire—Fire in the wagons—"

There were twenty wagons strung out like a long gaunt snake crossing the Pass of Glorieta, and this cry was the second excitement to strike the caravan within the space of minutes. First it had been a long, jubilant hail passed back from Jess Odams' lead wagon. "Santa Fe—Santa Fe's ahead! Git up, mule, git up! Hi yi, there's Santa Fe ahead—"

They had crossed the last hump, crawling down-grade toward the toy-town

Tensely Dramatic Novel of the Covered Wagon Traders



SANTA FE!

By M. HOWARD LANE

Neither the blasting heat of the *Jornada del Muerte* nor those deadlier, man-made flames could keep Cliff Sargent from Santa Fe where, he figured, his Ben Franklin stoves would fetch their weight in gold. But Jerico Jordan—trader in treachery and death—was willing to swap only one thing for them . . . a lonely tombstone carved with Sargent's name!

Madrone's body arched over the spinning wheels.

seen in the distance, and then this dread cry had come.

Cliff Sargent, riding beside the Odams' wagon heard the shout, and a question flashed instantly across his mind. Why should fire break out in any wagon at this time of afternoon? No whale-oil lamps were burning inside any emigrant wagon, and there was no need for torches this bright afternoon.

A strong breeze was blowing down from the pinnacles behind them, gushing over all the wagons, and one blazing wagon could shower sparks on all the Conestogas and Pittsburghs ahead of it.

Whose wagon had caught on fire? Cliff saw Candida Odams—Candy most everybody called her—leap to her feet alongside her father who was driving their six-mule hitch. She craned around as he whirled his own buckskin mount toward the rear of the train.

The girl's sharp cry echoed the hoarse exclamation that whipped from his own lips. "Cliff, Cliff it's your wagon—"

Sargent's booted heels were already plunging deep into the flanks of his mount, and the buckskin leaped forward.

Smoke and ugly flame were billowing up from the Osnaburg sheeting that covered the bows of his wagon. Through it he could see men milling about the big vehicle and for a second he relaxed a little in his drive down the length of the train. The water barrels strapped to the sides of his wagon were full and buckets were hanging close to them. A couple of dozen pailfuls tossed in the right places would stem the blaze before it could bite into the main body of the wagon. There was nothing much inside that fire could damage. Even his blanket roll was shoved up under the heels of his Mexican muleteer to make room for the load that wagon carried.

Pots and pans and cutlery, and Ben Franklin stoves! Every penny he could scrape together had gone into the purchase of those articles, and every one of those pennies was due to multiply a hundred fold or more in Santa Fe.

He'd used a time-worn phrase back in St. Louis when he spoke of his enterprise. "Almost any article of iron is worth almost its weight in gold once you got it to Santa Fe. There are wealthy haciendaros out there who have never seen a cook-stove, or an iron kettle. Emigrants are pouring into New Mexico territory, some of them figuring to buy household gear when they get there. I tell you the market hasn't been scratched," he earnestly told St. Louis friends and they'd listened and loaned him the money to purchase the cargo that rested in the burning wagon!

CLIFF skirted a giant freighter, lost sight of his own for a moment, and then his momentary relief was shattered as he caught another glimpse of his wagon. The smoke was billowing thicker. Men were cutting his mules from the traces with frantic haste. Why weren't they dousing the tilt with water instead of wasting time unhitching the mules? He roared out a cry, but it was lost in the welter of yells and the racket of wagons all along the line.

Smoke swept forward along the spiny ridge-top road they were traveling. On either side of the rutted way the ridge dropped steeply into barren, tangled washes two hundred feet below. As the smoke swept clear for a moment Cliff realized why the men had unhitched his mules. They were going to shove his wagon off the road, roll it from the ridge to destruction in the gulches.

"No—!" the ragged yell burst uncontrollably from his lips. "They can't do it. Just a little water—"

He was close enough now to make out some of the figures about his wagon, and one of them towered above all the rest. The sight brought a curse to his lips, and

then he recognized a broad, squat shape beside the six-four giant.

The giant was Toby Madrone, bully-boy trouble-maker and boss wagoner for Jerico Jordan, the squatty man. A Santa Fe trader, and Captain of the Train by virtue of having the largest number of wagons in the caravan, Jordan, in Sargent's opinion, was a slippery cuss who could likely crawl under the belly of a sidewinder without disturbing the snake. Emigrants in the river wagon-camps at Independence, flattered at the offer of a real Santa Fe trader to let them join his own wagons for the long trek across the *Jornada del Muerte,* had soon began to grumble a little at their bargain. Jerico Jordan had proved to be a ruthless leader, and Toby Madrone and the muleteers and drover who cared for his eight big freighters had lorded it over the camps like despots. "Jerico Jordan's Private Army," some of the emigrants had taken to calling his band, and yet there'd been only two willing to defy the man. Cliff Sargent had been one; Jess Odams the other. They'd stood up to the trader in Council Meetings along the Trace, demanding their rights and sticking by their guns.

Jerico Jordan's hooded dark eyes had more than once shown a calculating hatred for the young Missouri up-start who was trying to break into the Santa Fe trade. Cliff had realized this, and he knew bleakly that if Jordan succeeded in pushing his wagon off the Trace it would come close to spelling his doom. The thought maddened him as he rushed recklessly into the path of the wagon the men were shoving toward the rim of the road. Sparks and heat gushed forward. Tongues of flame from the completely enveloped tilt licked toward him as he drew the buckskin to a panicky halt.

"Hold it!" he yelled. "Get water on that fire—"

None of them seemed to hear him. Cliff leaped from the buckskin, a lithe, sinewy man of medium height with a good spread of shoulders and a blunt, normally good-humored face. Now his lips were drawn back in a grimace of rage. He leaped toward the side of the sluggishly rolling wagon, snatched a bucket from its hook, and then a giant hand caught the collar of his shirt and jerked him violently backward. Caught off balance, Cliff stumbled around, swinging the wooden bucket like a flail. Luck, more than design, carried the bucket high, and he saw it smash solidly into the side of Toby Madrone's face. The giant's head jerked sidewise from the force of the blow, and he lost his grip on the young trader's collar.

Rage, demoniacal in its intensity, reddened the muleteer's face. He raised one huge fist like a maul, but the blow was never struck for other arms were grabbing at the Missourian now. He felt hands

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catch at his elbows and pin them behind his back. Twisting in their grip, Cliff got one last look at his wagon—and his fortune. Red banners in the sunlight, the flames were down at the woodwork now, and after a final push the wagon gained momentum of its own. It rolled down the last short slope to the rim, hung there for a moment, then toppled forward.

The cased gear in the wagon set up a loud clatter as the load shifted to the tumbling fall of the freighter. The sound was almost like mocking laughter in Cliff Sargent's ears.

He felt the hands holding him release their grip, and he passed a dazed hand across his smarting eyes. This looked like the end of hope—of everything. Then he stiffened grimly. There'd be no end to anything until Jerico Jordan had paid in full for destroying his cargo.

CHAPTER TWO

Trouble Waits a Trader

THE SQUAT trader loomed directly in front of him, broad and powerfully built. His face was a round, benign mask framed by sparse reddish whiskers that he kept carefully trimmed and combed. He favored black broadcloth as befitted a merchant of substance, and his suits set the style for the business men of Santa Fe.

"My boy," he said in tones that he contrived to make sorrowful, "this has been a terrible shock to you, I know. Forgive Toby for pulling you away from your wagon, but it was for your own good, believe me. Why you might have fallen beneath the wheels—"

"And acted as a brake to keep your men from pushing it over the grade." Cliff snapped. "Yeah, I might have done just that if I'd thought of it soon enough. Maybe, if I had, some of my friends in the train with heads cool enough to use water would have got here in time to save the cargo, instead of losing it all!"

"Now, Sargent," the brawny trader spoke indulgently, as though to an excited child, "you know nothing else could have saved the rest of the caravan. Why, those flames would have been in one of my wagons inside of another three minutes, and from there they could have spread all along the line with this wind to whip them forward. As Captain of this wagon train," he ended grandly, "I'll take the full responsibility for sending your wagon off the trail."

"Which ain't sellin' my stoves in Santa Fe," Cliff snapped. He could feel his muscles quivering with the desire to leap forward and smash the sardonic smile from Jerico Jordan's face, but he knew that would gain him nothing but a beating from Toby Madrone. And if Madrone couldn't finish the chore, there were a half dozen other Jordan men ready to add their fists and boots to the fray.

Emigrants whose wagons were bunched up near the head of the line, ran up panting, and asking voluble questions. Others moved curiously to the edge of the road and peered down into the gorge.

Jerico Jordan had his audience now, and his voice boomed forth. "My boy," he said, "we all know this has been a grievious loss to you, and I admire the courage with which you are taking it. In fact, I have had my eye on you all the way across the *Jornada*. Son, I need a young man with the foresight and vision you possess to enter my trading post in Santa Fe. A young man to be my right bower. That position is yours, my boy, if you will accept it—"

Cliff felt temper building up in him again, like a head of steam in a boiler. "Jordan," his gray eyes were snapping, and his mouth was straight as a bar of iron, "I wouldn't accept a cup of water from you if I was dying of thirst, but while we're still talking, maybe you can tell me how that fire got started."

Toby Madrone stepped in from the side. The huge wagoner thrust his face close to the young trader. "You tryin' to insinuate somethin'—?" he growled threateningly.

Cliff threw back his head to look full into the muddy black eyes of the giant. "When I got anything to say, I say it," he flung his challenge at the wagoner. "I don't know how that fire got its start, but I aim to find out!"

A VOICE from the rim of the road drew Cliff's attention. "Sargent," one of the emigrant men called excitedly, "come hyar and take a look. By glory, rolling down through all that dirt knocked the fire right outa your wagon. 'Course there ain't much left of it but kindlin' wood, but some of them crates and boxes you wuz carryin' don't look like they been banged up very much."

As Cliff stepped to the rim of the road and stared down into the gorge some of the hope that had started to build up in him vanished. Part of his packing cases had fallen clear of the wagon, all right, but a good share of them had burst open and scattered utensils in their wake as they followed the wagon to the bottom of the gorge. But those had been the lighter cases, he realized, as he studied the scene more closely. Some of the heavier boxes that had contained the Ben Franklin stoves appeared to have ridden the wagon to its final resting place. If the cast-iron in them hadn't been cracked by the force of the fall, the fire certainly hadn't damaged them.

"If I can salvage just those stoves," Cliff thought, "I'll still make enough to pay back the money I borrowed. And if I can find any proof he set that fire, Jerico Jordan will pay for the rest—or one of us will take a quick trip to Hades."

A hand that was almost timid touched the sleeve of the young trader's shirt. Candy Odams was standing beside him. "Cliff," she said softly, "that Diego, that muleteer of yours, rode past our wagon just a few minutes after you started back here. You must have missed him in the smoke because he was riding awfully fast—"

"Aboard a saddled horse?" Cliff asked her slowly.

"Yes," the girl nodded. "I—I didn't get a very good look at it, but daddy thought that it was one belonging to Mr. Jordan's party. He—he unhitched a mule as quick as he could and took off bareback after the man. But daddy's not much of a rider. I don't think he'll catch him."

"Let's go find your dad," Cliff said abruptly. "This is something I want to know more about."

They had the road mostly to themselves as they turned back along the wagons, and Cliff caught up the buckskin's reins and looped them over his arm as he walked with the girl. Emigrants and Jerico's men alike were returning to their wagons, and Toby Madrone was riding back and forth along the line urging men into their high seats again.

"Catch up! Catch up!" His bull bellow roared up and down the length of the train. "We're goin' to make Santa Fe, if we drive half the night. Get a move on—"

"So Diego ran away after the fire started," Cliff spoke half to himself. "And on a saddled bronc. Most hosses are in the cavvy; Diego had no time to leather one after he jumped my wagon. So some hombre had a bronc waitin' for him—"

It was a thread of definite proof that the fire in his wagon had been planned in advance, but Cliff knew dismally that it was going to take many more threads before he could accuse Jerico Jordan of arson.

They were near the head of the train, close enough to Odams' wagon to hear the voices that came from the front seat of the big Conestoga, and Cliff found him-

self shivering a little at the stentorian tones of Matilda Odams. That voice had quelled her husband, Jess, for a quarter of a century, and Cliff had often wondered how that pair had ever begot such a lovely daughter. But now he listened with gradually growing admiration for Candida's mother. She was reading the riot act to somebody hidden from them on the other side of their big prairie schooner.

"Where Jess Odams is, is none of your business," the girl's mother was exclaiming. "And as for that young peddler payin' court to my datter, that ain't none of your bizness either. I hear tell he lost his wagon awhile ago, and all his pots and pans, and it's a cryin' shame for the likes of you to come tellin' me that we'd be wise not to associate with him no more. Well let me tell you somethin', Jerico Jordan," she continued as though nothing would stop her, "you been bossin' this wagon train since we left Independence, and it's just been by the grace of God that we didn't meet any of them Comanches tryin' to take our scalps. I'll bet if we had, you'd a-been the first to run. Now git, you scalawag, and don't show your face to us again."

Cliff glanced wordlessly at Candy, and there was something close to a grin on his face as he waited Jerico Jordan's reply. He wondered how Jordan would take the old woman's tongue-lashing.

"Mrs. Odams," the trader's voice was coldly expressionless. "I came here to speak, not be shouted at. If you people plan to settle around Santa Fe remember what I have said. Stay away from Sargent! Good day!"

Candida Odams' back was ramrod straight, and Cliff saw a hint of her mother's anger in the blue sparks that shone in her eyes.

"What business," she asked hotly, "has Jerico Jordan to tell us whom we shall call friend?"

"None," Cliff told her grimly, "but he's declared war on me. I ain't going to saddle you with my troubles, and he's right about Santa Fe. When I made my first trip out here a year ago I heard that Jordan was the big gun. He still is, far as I know, and folks who cross him don't get along very good."

"But you're going against him!" the girl cried.

"Yes I am," Cliff told her slowly, "but I've got nobody but myself to worry about, and your dad's got you and your mother."

Matilda Odams, the reins in her hands, overheard the last of their conversation as they reached the side of the wagon.

Her eyes snapped down at him. "Young man," she said tartly, "you're in for trouble, and you don't look like the kind to dodge it. Now quit your thinking about us. After what I told that peddler I guess we're in it about as deep as you."

JESS ODAMS swung his lathered mule alongside the rolling wagon fifteen minutes later, and Matilda told him of the trader's warning. "I sent him packin'," she ended succinctly.

Odams nodded, then turned to Cliff. "Your driver," he said, "had too much of a start for me. I couldn't come up with him. But he's your man, Sargent."

"He probably did it," Cliff said. "But on whose orders?"

"Perhaps," Jess Odams said thoughtfully, "Jerico Jordan doesn't want to see any stoves in Santa Fe that he hasn't imported himself."

The same suspicion had been in Cliff's mind since the Santa Fe trader had offered to take him into his own trading post, but proving it would be a horse of a different color.

"Those stoves and the rest of the stuff that was in my wagon is scattered halfway from hell to breakfast," he told Jess Odams, "but I'm just ornery enough to think I can salvage some of it. The light's going to hold long enough for me to ride

down to my wagon. If any more of Jordan's men come around askin' questions you tell them I've ridden on to Santa Fe. What them gents don't know about me from now on ain't goin' hurt 'em any."

Candy had been listening to their talk from the wagon seat, and now she leaned out to give Cliff her hand. He held it for a moment riding alongside, and their eyes said things that both of them had been too shy to put into words.

"We'll wait for you in Santa Fe, Cliff," she said softly. "Good luck."

By the time Cliff managed to pick his way up the talus-strewn wash, shadows were deep in the gorge where his wagon had come to its last resting place. The peaks of the Glorietas were still gilded with late sunlight, but Cliff knew that it would be long after dark before he finished his inspection here and made it to Santa Fe.

All the way up the gorge he had studied it to see what chance he might have to bring in a light wagon. The conclusion had forced itself upon him that a wagon of any kind was out of the question. Only a pack-train could ever get through the boulders and brush that choked the bottom of the canyon.

The wagon was a splintered heap, choked with dirt that had followed it down the slope. Smoke-blackened shreds of the tattered tilt still clung to charred wagon bows, he noticed, as he ground-reined the buckskin and stepped to the smashed vehicle.

Cliff stared at it for a moment, letting his eyes search for telltale signs that might add another thread of proof to his theory that the fire had been set deliberately. It had been useless to try and question any of the wagoners behind his own freighter, for all along the trail Jerico Jordan had sandwiched Cliff's lone wagon in between a pair of his own. Now, as he let his eyes study the wreckage, Cliff noted that the tail gate itself was the most badly burned part of the sturdy body. He stepped closer, fingering bits of the charred wood.

Particles of the charcoal clung to his finger-tips like grease and wouldn't rub off. Cliff passed his hand beneath his nose, and the answer was suddenly clear. The charcoal felt greasy to his touch because someone had saturated the end gate with whale-oil.

Whale-oil and a short torch had done the trick. It was the last proof he needed to show arson had caused the fire. *"But you can't pin it on Jordan without Diego—"* Cliff spoke the words half aloud.

IMPATIENCE urged him to start the search for the fugitive muleteer immediately, but he quelled the impulse. Right now he had to learn if he had anything left that he could sell.

There had been a tool-box beneath the wagon seat, and in it he found a claw-hammer bar that would do to pry the tops from the packing cases. The boxes were fire-blackened but he opened one and then another, and something close to elation rose inside him. The stoves had survived their rough ride down the side of the canyon. Some of the blacking on them was worn off, but that was damage which could be easily repaired.

He turned up the slope, toiling through the growing gloom toward other packing cases of cutlery and pots and pans. Little more than a glance at them was enough to show that a good share of this hardware could be saved.

Jordan had not succeeded in ruining him, if that had been his aim. "He's failed," Cliff thought. He studied one shattered packing case filled with bright kitchen cutlery, and on the handle of each utensil "Sargent Ware" was stamped. He'd figured it might make a good advertisement, might someday be the cutlery that people would call for again and again in this raw new territory of New

Mexico. "If I can get a string of mules in here soon enough to keep the sand and wind from scratching hell out of everything, I'll make out, and to hell with Jerico Jordan!"

His defiant words seemed to carry to the high rim, for an answer came on the heels of them—a rifle shot that spouted dust in front of his feet. For the space of a second Cliff stood without moving. This was the first time he'd ever heard death so close to him. Then he heard the ugly hiss of a second slug slide past his back, and he dove instinctively to the protection of the shattered wagon, right hand reaching for the cap-and-ball revolver on his hip. But the range, he knew, even as he grasped the weapon, was beyond reach of the short-gun.

Cliff cursed. He'd had a Remington rifle in its case beneath the wagon seat, but somewhere on the Conestoga's downward plunge the weapon had become dislodged and tossed clear.

Peering past the end gate of the wagon, Cliff saw the lingering black-powder smoke on the rim where that unseen marksman was trying to target him. One fact was plain—Jerico Jordan coppered his bets. He'd left a watcher behind to take care of Cliff in case he doubled back to see if any of his cargo was salvageable.

Cliff pulled his tobacco pouch from the pocket of his shirt and emptied it. Moving carefully, he scraped a handful of the black charcoal from the tail-gate, and filled the pouch.

"This might be something to show Santa Fe's new sheriff," he decided grimly. A year ago when he'd first visited the city, the law had still rested in the hands of native New Mexicans. But trappers and traders and emigrants had brought problems of enforcement beyond the grip of men who had known little lawlessness save an occasional drunken brawl.

Now, according to a trapper he'd met in Independence, they had changed things. "Got a two-gun sheriff now," the trapper had told him, "and believe it or not, he's an honest man. He don't give a damn how much hell you raise long as it comes under the headin' of good times, and you pick your fights with Americans. But him and a judge named Quinn shore pin back the ears of tinhorns and scalawags—"

Cliff patted the pouch back into his pocket, and waited impatiently for complete darkness to come. A bullet, then another one buried itself in the sand close by his cover, and Cliff's jaw muscles ridged. He touched the pouch in his pocket. There lay one bet that Jerico Jordan couldn't copper. He hunkered and waited till the night closed in. . . .

THE LIGHTS of the city spread out below him like candles. The stars overhead told Cliff the hour was late, but it wouldn't matter, he knew. When a caravan hit town, Santa Fe forgot there was such a thing as night and day. One became the same as the other, for muleteers and drovers, emigrants and traders headed toward the same place. The Plaza—and La Fonda. End of the trail. End of the *Jornada del Muerte,* and its dangers from thirst and Comanche raiders. Time to celebrate on red wine and El Paso brandy; bright eyes and laughing red lips—all designed to make a man forget heat and dust, and endless days. That was the promise La Fonda held for the new arrival.

"And that's where I might get a line on Diego," Cliff thought as he rode in.

The Plaza was as gay as he remembered it. Serapes over the rails gave touches of color to second balconies. Long arcaded adobes surrounded the Plaza almost like a solid wall, and a fountain played in its center. Lights glowed behind tall windows, adding a festive touch to the crowds of laughing men and women

milling restlessly about the square.

Along the eastern side of the Plaza, Cliff noticed some of Jerico Jordan's towering wagons whose contents were being unloaded and carried into a two-story adobe. The trader's store occupied the ground floor, and his living quarters were above.

He watched the busy workmen as the buckskin picked its own way through Plaza traffic. Jordan had a mighty good grip on his crew to be able to keep them on the job this first night in from the *Jornado*.

The thought roused his curiosity, and he twitched the buckskin around to an idle walk. The men, he could see, had been liberally supplied with red-eye before starting to unload. Some of them sang boisterously as they moved about the wagons; others staggered a little under their burdens.

"Ain't so bad handlin' this stuff at night as I figured," he heard one say to a companion. "Toby promised us a bonus for the job, and we're gittin' all the free booze we can drink. We'd be payin' for it over in La Fonda—"

"Yeah, but they's gals over thar," the other grumbled.

Toby Madrone's huge figure came into view around the tail-gate of the wagon. "Stow that gab, and get a move on," he growled, "Jerico ain't payin' you gents to talk."

"What the hell's his rush to git this stuff unloaded anyway?" the grumbler asked the boss wagoner.

Madrone's fist answered the question. Cliff was close enough to see the blow lift the workman off his feet. He heard the ugly sound of it, and he watched the man's knees fold loosely, like a closing hinge.

"The same," Toby Madrone spoke through his teeth, "is waitin' for the next gent who gets nosey. Don't ever ask questions when you work for Jerico Jordan."

CHAPTER THREE

La Fonda's First Victim

CLIFF twitched the buckskin into a quick turn. He wanted none of Toby Madrone tonight. La Fonda beckoned across the breadth of the Plaza, gay music of a Spanish orchestra filtering out through the wide, welcome doors and across its arbored patio where some revelers drank at outdoor tables. He headed toward the cantina, but his reflections were still behind him at Jordan's wagons. Toby Madrone was edgy as a hungry cougar. Why had a simple question brought his fists into play? Why was it necessary to empty at night wagons that could be unloaded in the daytime more easily? He could find no answer to the questions.

After enduring the endless monotony of the desert, La Fonda was enough to make any man glad he'd come to Santa Fe. Cliff stepped into the huge cantina, bright with torch light and whale-oil lamps. A half dozen barkeeps dispensed behind the one long bar, and gaiety reigned loudly. Trappers in buckskin toasted each other with horns of Taos Lightning held high in their hands. Teamsters, sullen on the trail, were jovial spenders here. Sober-faced emigrants forgot all their cares after a couple of glasses of El Paso brandy. Cliff grinned at the sight of some of the men lurching noisily about the cantina, slapping on the shoulder friends and strangers alike.

Cliff angled toward the bar for one horn of that Taos Lightning, then he saw Jess Odams making a somewhat wobbly way toward him. Jess clapped a friendly hand on the young trader's shoulder, and Cliff noticed with a start as he glanced into the emigrant's steady blue eyes that his drunkenness was purely feigned.

"Been hoping you'd show up here tonight," he said softly as Cliff slowed his

pace. "What'd your hardware look like?"

"Most of it can be salvaged," Cliff told him briefly.

"You figure out how the fire got started?"

Cliff nodded. "Whale-oil and a torch. I've got the proof of that, but it's not enough. My next chore is to locate Diego. That gent is going to visit the sheriff right along with me—"

"He ain't around here," Odams said worriedly, "and I ain't so sure this is a healthy place for you, either. That's what I was hopin' to get a chance to tell you. Earlier this evening I was pretending to be drinking and moseying around the patio. Toby Madrone and Jordan were at a table with their heads together. I got close enough to hear some of their talk, but I couldn't make much sense out of it, 'ceptin' your name was mentioned, and then some words about wagons. But I don't think yores was the only one they were talking about. Seemed to be somethin' about unloadin' their own, *muy pronto.*"

"They're doing that right now," Cliff informed the emigrant. "But I'm damned if I can figure how I tie in—"

"I dunno either," Odams admitted. "But one thing I'm mighty sure of, son, they're aimin' to put you out of the way first chance they get. You prove your point with that new sheriff, and Jordan's name ain't goin' to be worth a fiddler's damn around this town. A lot of law-abidin' citizens are moving in here now, and they won't put up with scalawags once it's proved they're crooked."

They had reached a clear space at the long bar as they talked, and Cliff signaled for brandy. He was quiet while the barkeep poured the drinks, thinking that what Odams had told him was true. Jerico Jordan could not afford to let him live—not after he got his report from the man he'd left behind on the Glorieta road.

"He'll know by now," Cliff told his companion quietly, "that I went to look over my wagon. And if he's smart as I think he is, he'll also know that I figured how the fire got started."

"You've got a greater fortune in that load than you realize," Odams murmured. "I've been doing a little nosing around on that score, too, and for some reason most of the traders coming in here seem to think all these New Mexicans want is fooforaw and folderol to put on their backs. But what they really want are your pots and pans and them Ben Franklin stoves. Get them here, Sargent," his voice was fired with enthusiasm, "and you'll be a rich young man!"

"Or a dead one," Cliff said dryly.

HE COVERED the room with his glance after the emigrant left him to return to the wagon camp. The one glass of brandy, Cliff had noted with some amusement, thickened Odams tongue a little, and he wasn't exactly steady on his legs when he walked from the cantina. Cliff could guess the reception Matilda would give him when he reached camp.

Unconsciously his eyes had been watching the progress of a red-skirted dancing girl moving gracefully between the tables. A red rose was tucked in a wave of her glossy black hair, and her bright lips laughed at men who tried to grab her as she passed their tables.

"Nada Nada!" she kept repeating lightly as she eluded the clutching hands. Her attention seemed to be focussed on someone at the rear, and as she drew closer, Cliff realized that she was coming directly toward him. The girl drew alongside, and slipped her hand through the crook of his elbow, pressing against him so that he could feel the warm contours of her body. Her lips smiled; there was laughter in her dark eyes.

Cliff studied her curiously. Why had this girl singled him from a roomful of men, some of whom were undoubtedly

far more handsome and better dressed than himself.

"A drink, Senorita?" he invited, curious.

"*Si,*" the girl nodded, and she lifted her head to snap her fingers at a new barkeep who had taken his place at their end of the bar. "Pablo, two glasses of the brandy," she commanded, and then she lifted slender fingers to Cliff's chin, and tipped his head down toward her. He lost sight of the new barkeep.

"Amigo," the girl whispered, "you are one they call Cleef Sargent?"

"Yes," Cliff said, "but how come you know my name?"

"Diego tell me," the girl was almost whispering now.

Cliff felt an electric surge of excitement sweep through him. "Go on," he said tersely.

"He wants for to see you," she whispered. "I am, how you say, hees lady friend? He theenks you will come here, but he dares not come himself for he has take the dinero from Senor Jordan, and if he is seen with you they will think it is what you call the double-cross.

"You will come with Conchita, no?" she asked softly, noting his hesitancy.

Cliff downed his brandy. This one seemed even better than the first. "Where is Diego?" he asked.

"Across the Plaza, Senor. In the *Cantina de las Rosas.* Eet is the small place where poor men go. Come. Follow me."

The girl's hand was under his elbow, and Cliff turned with her toward the door. He was surprised to find that his own knees felt a little unsteady.

The Plaza was quieter now than it had been. Many of the celebrants had evidently called it a night, but there was one bunch of men he could see dimly through the darkness, coming toward them—revelers, evidently bound for La Fonda. As they drew alongside he heard sudden, sharp words. Vaguely, he saw a fist swing in the dark; caught the flash of a knife. What suddenly seemed like a hundred voices set up a terrific yelling.

The men swarmed over him. Cliff felt knuckles graze his cheek-bone, but the blow didn't seem to hurt. A heavy weight leaped on his back and he staggered forward as a last flash of clarity told him that he had been drugged. Drugged and led out here like a bull to the slaughter.

"Just about what a stupid greenhorn deserves," Cliff thought dismally, and then an accurate toe kicked the last consciousness from his mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thirty Days or Thirty Dollars

THE first return to reality made his head feel like somebody was strumming a banjo inside it. Cautiously, he

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
*F-N TEST?
*The Famous Finger Nail Test
1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.
YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK LIKE THIS WITH NEW
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
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CREAM-OIL CHARLIE SAYS: "IT CONTAINS LANOLIN!"
3 TUNE IN: 2 NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sunday evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Saturday afternoons, NBC Network.
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC

tried opening one eye. Scabby white walls pinwheeled before his gaze, then gradually settled into a semblance of solidity as he got his other eye open. Hand-wrought bars formed one wall, and a hall lay beyond them.

Cliff reached up gingerly to rub his stubby chin, and the realization came to him that he was in jail! A man in the hall was rattling a key in the door-lock with one hand. The other held a pail of water. At first Cliff couldn't see him very plainly, and then gradually he made out the man's white-toothed grin.

"Amigo," he drawled, "you shore hung on one beaut of what we call a La Fonda Special."

With effort, Cliff swung his feet from the plain boards of the bunk where someone had tossed him. Details were beginning to come back to him now. He groaned and ran one hand through his tousled hair, then looked again at the grinning man standing in the now open door of the cell. There was a bright silver star on the lapel of his calfskin vest, and a pair of walnut handled Colts holstered low in crossed belts about his waist.

Cliff looked at him and grinned wryly. "I was counting on meeting you, sheriff, but not from the inside of the bars looking out!"

Ned Murdock had a lean, strong face, and eyes that sobered swiftly as he dropped the bucket and stepped back to the door. He already made his appraisal of the young Missourian.

"You don't look like the kind who'd start a ruckus in the Plaza, and land yourself here in the pokey for disturbing the peace," he said.

Lifting one hand before he answered, Cliff touched the pocket of his shirt. The tobacco pouch he'd filled with greasy charcoal was gone. So was the money belt he carried about his waist.

He shook his head. "Sheriff," he admitted, "I ain't got a leg to stand on. Ain't nobody should fall for a trick like I done. A gal in La Fonda fed me one of these here Mickey Finns and led me out to the Plaza. Some of her friends were waiting, and from the way I feel they gave me a good workin' over. They faked the fight that brought you runnin', but I don't count on you believin' me."

Murdock shrugged noncommittally. "You'll get a chance to tell your story to Judge Quinn soon as you clean up. And you better have some dinero handy or get ready to sweat here for the next thirty days."

"Thirty days!"

"Yup," Murdock nodded. "We're all getting mighty tired of you teamsters that think yuh own Santa Fe. Why don't you gents pick fights with your own breed instead of jumpin' the natives? Things ain't as peaceful as you might think, and your kind ain't helpin' matters a damned bit."

Cliff drew a shuddering breath. "I'm a trader," he said desperately, "not a teamster. My name's Sargent, and somebody set my wagon load of goods on fire yesterday out along the Glorieta road—then ran it off the grade. I've got to get started back there today to try and salvage what I can."

"Whose outfit you cross with?" the sheriff asked.

"Jerico Jordan was the captain," Cliff told him, "and before I'm done I aim to prove that he was behind the fire in my wagon—and my bein' here right now."

"Them's tall charges to make against one of our prominent men," Ned Murdock said slowly. "I wouldn't go blabbin' that kind of talk around town were I you. Not if I couldn't prove it."

Cliff took a step toward the lawman, and their eyes clashed. "Murdock," he said flatly. "I heard back in Independence that you were an honest sheriff. I ain't changed my opinion yet. But there's one thing I want to know right now. If your answer is 'no' then I might just as well

start in doing my own sweatin' now."

"What's that?" the sheriff's voice was frosty.

"If I bring you proof that Jerico Jordan and Toby Madrone fired my wagon will you back my play with a warrant?"

Ned Murdock nodded. "I'll do better than that," he said promptly. "I'll give 'em this cell you're settin' in for a heap sight longer than thirty days."

FROM THE looks of it, Cliff Sargent was going to be the first one to serve time. Judge Quinn, when he'd faced the jurist, had listened to the charges, and taken the same attitude as the sheriff. Friendly relations between the New Mexicans and the Americans streaming into the territory were endangered by Plaza brawls.

"Thirty dollars, or thirty days!" the Judge had said, "and I'd a heap rather see you serve the time. Makes the lesson stick that much better. Next case—"

Murdock led his young prisoner back to the bare cell, but something in the earnestness of Cliff's former talk with him had evidently left a trace of friendliness in the lawman's mind.

"Did you have thirty dollars in that there moneybelt you claim was stolen?" he asked.

"No," Cliff told him honestly. "I had about twenty. Figured it'd see me through until I could sell some of my hardware."

"Got any friends out at the *acqueqia* camp?" Murdock asked offhandedly.

"Yes," Cliff nodded, "but I don't think they're well fixed for cash. Their name is Odams—"

The sheriff walked away, and Cliff doused his head for the second time, trying desperately to clear the fog from his brain. Under his breath he cursed Diego, the girl, and Jordan and Toby Madrone, but that didn't help much. Dismally, he realized that even if he got free of this jail, the odds were still piled high against him. Without money he couldn't hire mules and muleteers to freight in his scattered load. And as Murdock had warned, he couldn't accuse a merchant as firmly entrenched in the community as Jordan of deliberately trying to ruin him.

The hours passed leadenly. Cliff tried to get some sleep, but the ache in his head was too constant to permit that. Questions kept flooding his mind. Why had Jordan hired the cantina girl to lure him into the Plaza, and only roused enough trouble to land him in jail? He had no illusions concerning the trader. Jerico Jordan wanted him dead. So why hadn't he been killed outright, there in the Plaza or taken to some place where it could have been accomplished more inconspicuously.

As afternoon came and dulled the light in his cell, Cliff wondered if the sheriff had just been playing with him. Had he raised his hopes of getting word to the Odams without any intention of doing it? Could Jess raise thirty dollars even if the sheriff carried word of his predicament? He'd learned from remarks Candy had made that they'd spent almost their last dollar outfitting for this trip. And would he, Cliff asked himself a last grim question, be able to repay the money if they did manage to free him? Days counted as far as salvaging his hardware was concerned. Dust and wind would dull the luster of new pots and pans and bright cutlery.

Quick steps in the corridor outside the cell interrupted Cliff's thinking and he swung clear of the hard bunk. Candy Odams, backed by her father and Ned Murdock, came into view. Tears and a smile fought for control of the girl's face as she put her hands impulsively through the bars. Cliff took them, and again that feeling of communion caught at him. It would always be theirs if he could make this girl his wife. But he couldn't think that far ahead—yet.

"Cliff, Cliff," Candy said softly. "Dad and I have been wondering—"

He grinned at her through battered lips. "I've been doing the same thing," he said.

Murdock detained him with a light touch as they stepped into the late afternoon sunlight that flooded the plaza. His eyes were frosty and so was his voice. "Sargent," he said quietly, "my bargain still holds. If you bring me proof it better be good."

"It will," Cliff told him as quietly, "if I'm around to bring it at all."

The sheriff seemed to sense his meaning. "Turn up dead," he said grimly, "and I'll start an investigation of my own."

"That," he said dryly, "will help me a lot!"

NIGHT BROUGHT its disappointments. Cliff had left Candy and her father in the Plaza to make a search for his buckskin and the six matched Missouri mules that had been freed from his wagon and turned into the cavvy with other emigrant stock.

He'd walked to the big feed-lot where mules and oxen were usually pastured, and the owner had shaken his head in some surprise when Cliff came to ask about his mules.

"Why, Sargent," he'd exclaimed, looking at Cliff as though he thought him slightly daft, "yore muleteer, a feller calling hisself Diego, came after them shavetails this mornin'. Claimed you'd sent him to pick 'em up. As for the buckskin, nobody turned in no lost bronc left in the Plaza last night. Sometimes they come to me, and sometimes they get stole when a feller starts fillin' his carcass with that Taos Lightnin'."

Cliff had grinned ruefully as he retraced his steps to the Plaza. Jerico Jordan, he was compelled to admit, had certainly done a thorough job.

He returned to the Odams in their *acqueqia* camp, and as he finished telling them what he had learned, silence clamped down for a minute as each sought some answer to the Missourian's problem.

Cliff listened absently to the faint music of the water running along the *acqueqia*. Only one door still seemed open. He was loathe to mention it because the Odams had already done more for him than a man could rightly expect, and the odds were pyramiding that he'd never be able to repay past courtesies—let alone present ones.

Jess Odams stirred restlessly at his place beside the fading embers of the cookfire. "Jordan's shore done coppered all his bets," he was forced to admit at last. "Wish't we had more dinero—" his voice trailed away.

Cliff climbed to his feet, decision tightening his lips into an iron line. "Sometimes," he said slowly, "mules can take the place of money. I went looking for mine this afternoon because I had an idea that mebbe I could borrow some packsaddles and rope from that feed-lot man, sashay out in the morning and bring in enough stuff to sell quick and get the cash we need to bring in the stoves and heavy cases. It kinda looks now like Jordan beat me to that plan by sendin' Diego to pick up my mules."

Candy Odams, seated on a log beside her father, jumped suddenly to her feet, her young eyes shining. "Cliff," she asked softly, "did your tongue slip a minute ago when you used the word 'we'?"

"No," Cliff told her gently. "It came out a-purpose. I guess I've been kinda thinkin' that way ever since last night. If you want a down and out partner you got one."

"We've still got our mules," the girl said with a little lilt of laughter in her voice.

SLEEP came fitfully to all of them that night, and Candy was readying breakfast long before the dawn.

A sleepy-eyed hostler cut out Odams

mules for him as the sun touched the rim of the Glorietas with faint dawn color. Disinterestedly, he told them to help themselves to what they needed in the way of saddles and pack gear.

"Settle with the boss when yuh come back in," he grunted. "He won't charge yuh much for the use of the stuff—"

But three hours later, with the sun beating down hotly into the dry gorge where Cliff had found his wagon two afternoons before, both of the men could see that whatever the feed-lot man might ask would be too much.

Only a heap of white ashes was left to tell the whereabouts of the Missourian's wagon. Even the iron tires that had once banded the tall wheels had been stripped away.

No trace remained of his stock. They were gone cleanly as though the mountain air had absorbed them.

Cliff stood stock still and looked at the pile of white ash. "They didn't leave enough," he said in tones that he hardly recognized for his own, "to make even a tombstone for a trader!"

"Jordan!" Jess Odams muttered. "But how in Tophat did he do it? Jes' one day—" Hell'n damnation, you'd a had to unbolt some of them stoves to ever get 'em out of here. That sort of thing takes time, even if you got a big crew on the job."

Cliff was hardly listening, for he could see the trader's scheme clearly now, as plainly as though it lay on a blue-print in front of his eyes. "Jordan," he said slowly, "had this planned right down to the last cussed detail before he ever made a move. He fired my wagon and rolled it off here, figurin' to put me out of business and get my hardware to boot. He left that gent up top knowin' I'd come down for a look-see, and it was that hombre's job to try and throw a scare into me before I could see too much. You remember right after my wagon went over, Madrone started ordering people to get rolling, and bellerin' that you'd make Santa Fe if you drove half the night?"

Jess Odams nodded. "Go on," he said tersely, and his face looked almost the color of the ashes on the ground at their feet.

"When I hit the Plaza," Cliff continued, "four of Jordan's wagons were parked in front of his trading post, and Toby Madrone was bossin' a crew unloading them. He wanted those wagons emptied that night because he knew he was going to have a use for 'em the next day."

Understanding was beginning to come to the emigrant. "You mean he brung 'em back out here, yesterday, while you were in jail and stole your stoves and stuff? But how? He shore didn't drive 'em up this gulch!"

Cliff shook his head, remembering what had happened two nights ago. "I saw Madrone beat a man down because he asked why they were in such a hurry to get the wagons unloaded, and earlier you'd overheard them in La Fonda talking about me and wagons. They were laying their last plans to get my cargo, but they had to make danged sure that I was going to be out of the way for at least one day. And they knew the way to do that was to get me locked up in jail. They also knew the only bait I'd bite on would be the chance to lay hold of Diego, so they fixed it up with that dancehall gal. But there's one thing I can't figure," he ended slowly. "Why didn't they let one of those *paisanos* ram a knife through my back while they had a chance?"

BRUSH CRACKLED at the mouth of one of the narrow washes across the floor of the gorge, and Cliff whirled that way, hand streaking toward his borrowed Colt. As his fingers touched the weapon they froze. He was looking straight into the shining muzzle of a rifle thrust from the brush. The bore of it was like a dark,

sardonic eye, staring straight at him.

"That's right, Sargent," the voice behind the rifle belonged to Toby Madrone. "Hang right on tuh that Colt. Lift it slow and easy, and let 'er drop. You ain't goin' to be needin' it where you're going. Same holds for you, Pop, so jest quit lookin' at that rifle on your bronc. Diego, go out and get them guns."

Cliff cursed himself for a fool. The second they'd discovered the theft of his goods, he should have realized that Jordan might have planted men here to trap them if they returned.

A giggle, high-pitched as a woman's, sounded from the cover, and then Diego stepped into view. A small black mustache decked his upper lip and he twisted at the corner of it as he swaggered toward them.

"You theenk Diego is big fool who drives wagons for wages only?" he taunted. *"Por dios!* I know on which side of the bread is the butter."

Toby Madrone, with the cat-like tread some big men have, stepped into view behind the muleteer. He was grinning behind his black beard.

"Mebbe you'll know which side your bread is buttered on, too, Sargent, before we're finished," he drawled. "Get your hands behind your back, both of yuh. Diego, tie 'em up."

Cliff felt the bite of buckskin thongs drawn taut about his wrists, and before Diego was finished with him he knew there'd be no escape from the leather. The muleteer was a master at tieing knots. But again that curious question bothered him. Why was Madrone making them prisoner? Here was as good a place as any to kill them.

"Help 'em into their saddles," Madrone directed, "and then round up the mules. There ain't no sense in leavin' good shavetails here for the buzzards."

Jess Odams had spoken no word as yet, and Cliff could see that the emigrant was also wondering why Madrone hadn't killed them. There was only one possible answer. The big wagon-boss still wanted more from them than pots and pans and Ben Franklin stoves. Cliff studied that surmise as they rode down the hot gorge to the Glorieta road.

"Mebbe we'll get the chance to bargain," he thought, and added, *"We better."*

Diego followed them with the mule-train they'd brought out here, and Toby Madrone, bulking huge in the saddle of a horse the size of a Percheron, led the way down the road. Empty hills and canyons swept back from the brown ribbon of the road. Buzzards floated high through the cloudless sky, searching for carrion in the hot washes. Buttes in the distance looked like calico quilts hanging from some emigrant's clothesline. Any part of that vast, dry country could hide the bodies of a murdered man.

The broad marks of wagon wheels lay on the road, one pair turning into a deep wash that cut back toward the hills on their right. The mouth of the gulch looked no different than fifty others they had passed, but Cliff saw Madrone follow the single tracks, and he felt the sudden lift of excitement. Even Jerico Jordan hadn't dared take his stolen goods into Santa Fe!

The wash twisted in through the low hills, and Madrone led the way until they came into what looked like a small amphitheatre. Against the farther rim of it, Cliff saw a sagging, clapboard cabin and signs of an old mine dump. At one time some prospector had tried dry-placering here, and then abandoned the claim.

Behind the shack, the tip of an Osnaburg tilt loomed above the roof-line, and Cliff could easily imagine what was in the big freighter.

Madrone looked across his shoulder and grinned. "Guess what's in that wagon, Sargent?"

"I don't have to," Cliff told him grimly, and he could see why Diego had driven

the mules along behind them. There were no animals here to draw the wagon, and that Conestoga, laden with a fortune in hardware, was no good to Jerico Jordan as long as it was parked in a hidden desert canyon.

The big wagon-boss swung down in front of the cabin and stepped back to Cliff's side, his dark eyes burning. "Here's the end of the trail for you, amigo," he remarked, "unless you're smart—"

CHAPTER FIVE

Last Chance

WITH JESS ODAMS at his heels, Cliff entered the shack in front of the wagon boss. His eyes took a moment to focus in the dimness.

There was nothing in the cabin save a plain board table and a pair of bunks set against each of the side walls. Pack rats had left a litter in the corners. The smell of the place was musty, unused. His eyes settled on the table where a square of white paper lay, anchored by an inkwell and quill pen.

The sight of the sheet was somehow incongruous in the dinginess of the cabin. Cliff stared at it, able to make out Jerico Jordan's bold signature on one line at the bottom of it. Space was left for a second signature, below the writing on the document. It was a bill of sale, he realized, a bill of sale for all the trade goods he'd brought to Santa Fe—and Toby Madrone had brought him here to sign it.

The giant had moved up close beside him, and Cliff felt the man's big hand spin him around. "This," he said, and his muddy eyes were bright with anticipation, "is jest to put you in the mood to write your name."

There was no chance to dodge the blow. Madrone's fist arced out like a swinging maul, and Cliff felt himself almost lifted from his feet. The left side of his face and head felt like a battering ram had struck it. Hands still bound, he fell half across the room against one of the sagging bunks. Wood splintered beneath his weight and dust rose to clog his nostrils.

Through anger-brightened eyes, Cliff stared up at the big man beside the table. "Untie my hands," he gritted. "You oughta be able to defend yourself against a gent my size."

Diego's high-pitched giggle came from the doorway. "Heet him again, senor. I like to see thees."

Toby Madrone ignored the muleteer, and his heavy face was suddenly serious. "That's a sample, Sargent, of what is waitin' for you unless you get up on your hind laigs, and sign this bill of sale. Jerico likes things done legal—"

Cliff's grim laughter crossed the space between them. He could see, all at once, why Jordan had passed up two opportunities to have him killed. Part of the kitchen-ware he'd purchased in St. Louis had been stamped *Sargent Ware*. The Santa Fe trader could show none of these goods until he could prove he'd purchased them.

"It looks," Cliff matched the wagoner's drawl, "like mebbe I've saved my bacon—"

"You ain't saved nothin'," Toby Madrone's face contorted, and he moved a step toward the helpless trader lying in the ruins of the bunk. "I'll tromp the daylights out of you, less'n you put your name to that paper. That's a promise, Sargent."

Cliff stared up at him. "And you'll make it easy for us with a bullet, if I sign."

"You'll sign," Madrone said.

"No," Cliff shook his head.

The wagoner's boot struck below the ribs, and pain cascaded through him. Dimly, Cliff heard Jess Odams cursing in a voice monotonous with fury.

One giant hand jerked him to his feet, and Cliff felt his knees turning rubbery. He lurched toward the table, leaned against it, and cold sweat trickled down

across his nose. His head reeled dizzily.

"Madrone," each breath was filled with wracking pain, but he knew he had one last card to play.

"Yeah?"

"Jordan made a mistake when he saw to it that I was clapped in jail. Gave me a chance to talk to the sheriff," Cliff panted. "I couldn't back my statements, but if I turn up missing, Murdock is going to judge you—"

He watched the effect of his words change the expression on the wagoner's face. Madrone looked suddenly like a man caught between two fires, and Cliff pressed his advantage.

"Harness the mules," he suggested. "Drive into Santa Fe with me setting alongside you so folks can see us. Then they'll believe that paper when I put my John Henry at the bottom of it. You can't sell *Sargent Ware* until I do—and, damn you, you know it!"

He had the bully-boss of Santa Fe caught in a cross-fire and Madrone's dark face showed it.

"Damn Jerico anyway," he heard the wagoner mutter, "I wish he'd handled this himself. All right, Diego," Madrone's voice boomed, "get those mules hitched and ready to roll. We're drivin' to Santa Fe, and you're goin' to be settin' right inside the tilt behind the wagon seat. That toad-stabber you carry—put it through his guts if Sargent makes one move."

HE HAD gained a little time Cliff thought as he swayed on the high wagon seat alongside Toby Madrone, but that was about all. Cold steel against his spine reminded him of that. Diego was crouched inside the tilt, and Madrone had heaved Jess Odams in beside him after binding his ankles and wrists. Odam's life as well as his own was at stake, and Cliff let his thoughts dwell for a poignant moment on Candy—and Mrs. Odams. He guessed wryly that even that old battle-axe of a woman would miss having her husband around.

Santa Fe came slowly closer to them through the somnolent heat of the afternoon. Toby Madrone hunched morosely on the seat, except when he sent the long bull-whip looped about his right wrist out over the backs of the Missouri mules. Each surge of his massive shoulders stirred the shirt across his chest, and Cliff noticed a square of white paper inching a little farther into view at each swing of the whip. He fastened his eyes on it. Back at the cabin where Jerico Jordan's crew had taken his stolen load of goods, he'd had no opportunity to see what Toby Madrone had done with the bill of sale he'd refused to sign.

A document, he realized with sudden insight, that could back-fire on its maker, for Jerico Jordan's signature was already on it, counter-signed below the space left for his own name. The trader's confidence on drawing the bill had evidently been complete. He had foreseen no hitch in the plans that had so far worked so smoothly for him.

But if that bill of sale, with only Jordan's name at the bottom of it, was laid on Ned Murdock's desk—

Cliff breathed deeply and tore his eyes from the bill. Ahead he saw the towers of Santa Fe's Mission with the sun slanting westward behind it, and he knew they would reach the Plaza before many more minutes passed. As though some of his thoughts had communicated themselves to Diego, the man's knife pressed hard enough against his back to break the skin, and a warm stream of blood slid down his back. Cliff thought of Jess Odams tied helplessly next to the breed inside the wagon tilt. Any try that he made to escape might seal his own doom with one thrust of the knife, and a second would certainly finish Jess. But he knew the old emigrant well enough to guess that he'd say: "Take a chance, son—" A chance that could

mean just one of two things. Salvation—or death.

Cliff Sargent drew a deep breath as the Plaza came into view at the end of the street they were traveling. He kept his eyes steadfastly away from the paper protruding from Toby Madrone's pocket as he drawled: "Tobey, it ain't going to look very good to people in the square if they see me riding in with my hands tied behind my back."

Jerico Jordan's bully-boy jerked around on the seat like a puppet pulled by strings. He regarded the young trader for a moment without speaking, turning the words over in his mind. Cliff waited and he felt the stringer of blood against his back seeping inside the waistband of his pants. With free hands he might have a fighting chance to get that bill of sale. Bound, he had none. The balance lay in Madrone's muddy, suspicious eyes, and then the man slowly brought a big clasp knife from his pocket and sprung the blade.

"Ye're gettin' danged obligin', Sargent," he grunted. "I never thought about yore hands, but after I cut ye loose don't forget Diego's still got his knife in yore brisket. One wrong move—"

"And my cuchillo will dreenk more blood than eet is tasting now," the breed muleteer hissed from inside the canvas wagon sheet.

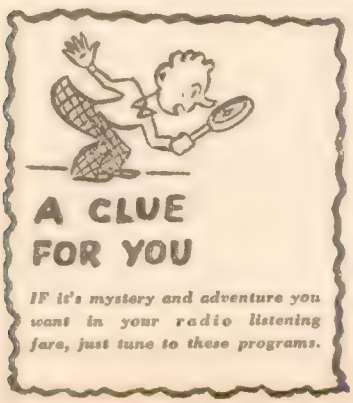
"I'm not ready to die yet," Cliff answered them sincerely. "Don't worry about me using my hands. They feel like stumps, the way you've had them tied."

Madrone chuckled. "They'll git enough circulation in 'em to sign your John Henry, all right. Hell, you shoulda been smart and took Jerico's offer to throw in with him. Any gent smart enough to bring stoves instead of geegaws to Santa Fe should know when he's licked. Yuh can't buck Jerico Jordan around this town."

"I guess you're right," Cliff said submissively, as he rubbed his hands together, trying to restore their circulation.

He felt them start to tingle as they reached the Plaza, and knew the blood had started to flow again. That bill of sale was like a magnet to his eyes but he kept his gaze fastened stolidly ahead, as Toby Madrone swung the mules expertly toward the facade of Jerico Jordan's Trading Post.

AS THOUGH he knew the sounds of his own wagon, Cliff saw the trader's squat shape fill the doorway of his store. Even across the hundred yards that still separated them he could see the grin of triumph that moved Jordan's lips, and his own mouth straightened grimly as he moved his eyes about the Plaza. This was the siesta hour for native New Mexicans; the only people moving about the square now were emigrants in from the *acquequita* camp. A tall Conestoga was no new sight to them.



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Check local newspaper program listings against possible variations in broadcast schedules.

MUTUAL BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.

Across the Plaza was the sheriff's office, set beneath a shady arcade. Although peace hummed in the air, a volcano was gathering force inside Cliff Sargent. Everything he wanted was tied up in that load inside the big freighter. Life, love, happiness. Tied up in a wagon load of pots and pans and Ben Franklin stoves—and a bill of sale in Madrone's shirt pocket.

Toby Madrone half-rose from his seat, an exhibitionist, proud of his skilled whipwork. He sent the lash out over the mules, cracking it like a string of Chinese firecrackers, and then Cliff made his bid. He lunged sidewise in the wagon-box, and felt the blade of Diego's knife scrape across his ribs like streaking sparks. He caught Madrone in the side with his shoulder, and felt his hand scrape cloth then touch paper. It crumpled in his hand, and he tore the bill of sale from Madrone's pocket as the teamster lurched sidewise off balance.

"I'll kill ye, Sargent—" Madrone's voice roared, and Cliff tried to dodge the flailing butt of the bull-whip the freighter smashed down at his head. The blow skidded off his right shoulder, but with muscles cracking, he managed to finish the heave that sent the freighter completely off-balance.

The giant's knee caught on the side of the box, and Cliff saw his big hands loose the reins, and try to catch the brake handle. But the mules, feeling their freedom, veered suddenly, and Madrone's body arched over the spinning wheels.

Cliff staggered as the wagon heeled, going up on two wheels. The mules were wild now, breaking into an insane run across the Square. Dimly he heard the shouts of frightened emigrants as he grabbed for the slipping reins. Then, in the path of the runaway team, he saw a girl, trim in bright calico and bonnet, with a face and figure he couldn't forget. Candy was trying to run before the thundering team bearing down on her. Cliff heard a man's hoarse cry of agony and half across the footrest he caught one sliding rein, and jerked with all his strength. Jess might thank him for this, he thought, if either of them lived.

The mule tangled in its trace chains and Cliff felt the wagon lurch sickeningly. The big freighter was going over. He felt his own body flung like a rock from a sling, but he held to the bill of sale as he struck the flinty adobe of the Plaza on one side and shoulder. Momentum rolled him like a ball, and Cliff tasted his own blood mixed with Plaza dirt.

His right arm was limp as he caught himself and stumbled to his feet. Fumblingly, half-blinded by dust, he tried to shift the bill of sale from his injured hand, and dropped it, a splash of white against the adobe. He had to bend to one knee to recover it—and trying to regain his feet was not easy. Pain began to leap from his broken shoulder and arm in grinding, agonizing waves that dimmed his eyes.

Someone was close to him. A hand was trying to help him up. He shook it off, and then Candy Odams cried, "Cliff, Cliff—"

Blackness was coming in waves, and he answered the girl thickly. "Murdock, got to get to Murdock, pronto, before Jordan—"

A Colt barked once from the direction of the trader's store, the sound almost lost in the shouting confusion that filled the Plaza as citizens converged on the overturned wagon and tangled team. Cliff saw the spurt of dirt raised by the bullet, and he knew that the battle wasn't won yet. If Jerico Jordan could get him, even now the trader might escape justice by claiming the shot was an accident—a bullet aimed at a downed mule.

"Run," he jerked out the word. "Get away from me. Your dad—at the wagon—"

CLIFF FORCED his legs to carry him forward. The sheriff's office wasn't far ahead of him now, and it looked like someone was waiting on the shadowy arcade. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jerico Jordan running at an angle to intercept him, and he forced a final effort. He fell on the steps leading up to the arcade, and a voice that he hardly recognized as his own screamed hoarsely.

Then another pair of wiry arms was giving him a lift, and he heard Ned Murdock's cool voice. "Sure goin' to give you credit for trying, amigo. Come on inside if you got something to show me. Better hurry it up. Looks like we're going to have company in a minute."

The inside of the office was cool, quiet after the uproar of the Plaza. Cliff put the crumpled, dirty bill of sale into the sheriff's hands.

"You wanted proof," he said thickly. "My goods are in that wagon of Jordan's that went over, and his name is on that bill of sale. Seems he was so sure Toby Madrone would get my John Henry on it, that he put his hand to it first—"

Jordan's squat bulk almost filled the door of the office. "Lies, sheriff, lies."

Cliff swung around. He saw the Colt rising in the trader's hand, and then Ned Murdock's arm flickered down, and there was a weapon in his hand, hammering lead at the man in the door. Cliff had never seen a gun appear so fast.

Jordan's Colt spun from his hand, and he stared down almost unbelievingly at his shattered wrist.

"You're too careless with that cutter," Murdock drawled. "I saw you take that sneak shot at Sargent out in the Square, and if that won't be enough to make Judge Quinn send you packin', this little document ought to cinch it."

A girl in bright calico had darted past the squat trader. She caught Cliff's good arm. "Darling," Candy Odams used the word for the first time, but it seemed natural, "Darling, come and take a look. You'll never see the like of it again."

Cliff moved stiffly toward the door, aware of a sudden alien racket.

Murdock's gun waved Jerico Jordan to the arcade ahead of them. "Maybe you better see this yourself, mister," he said. "I got a hunch it's going to be good."

It was. So good, Cliff could hardly believe his eyes. Standing beside the overturned Conestoga was Jess Odams, dirty of face, clothes torn, but nonetheless happy. He held a dishpan in one hand, an iron kettle in the other, and he was beating them together like a pair of cymbals.

"I allus wanted to be an auctioneer," he was chanting, "and here's my chance. Ladies and gents come this way to buy the finest hardware you ever laid your eyes on. Step lively folks for bargains in *Sargent Ware*. You'll be hearin' a lot of that name around these parts from now on. Mark me on that, friends."

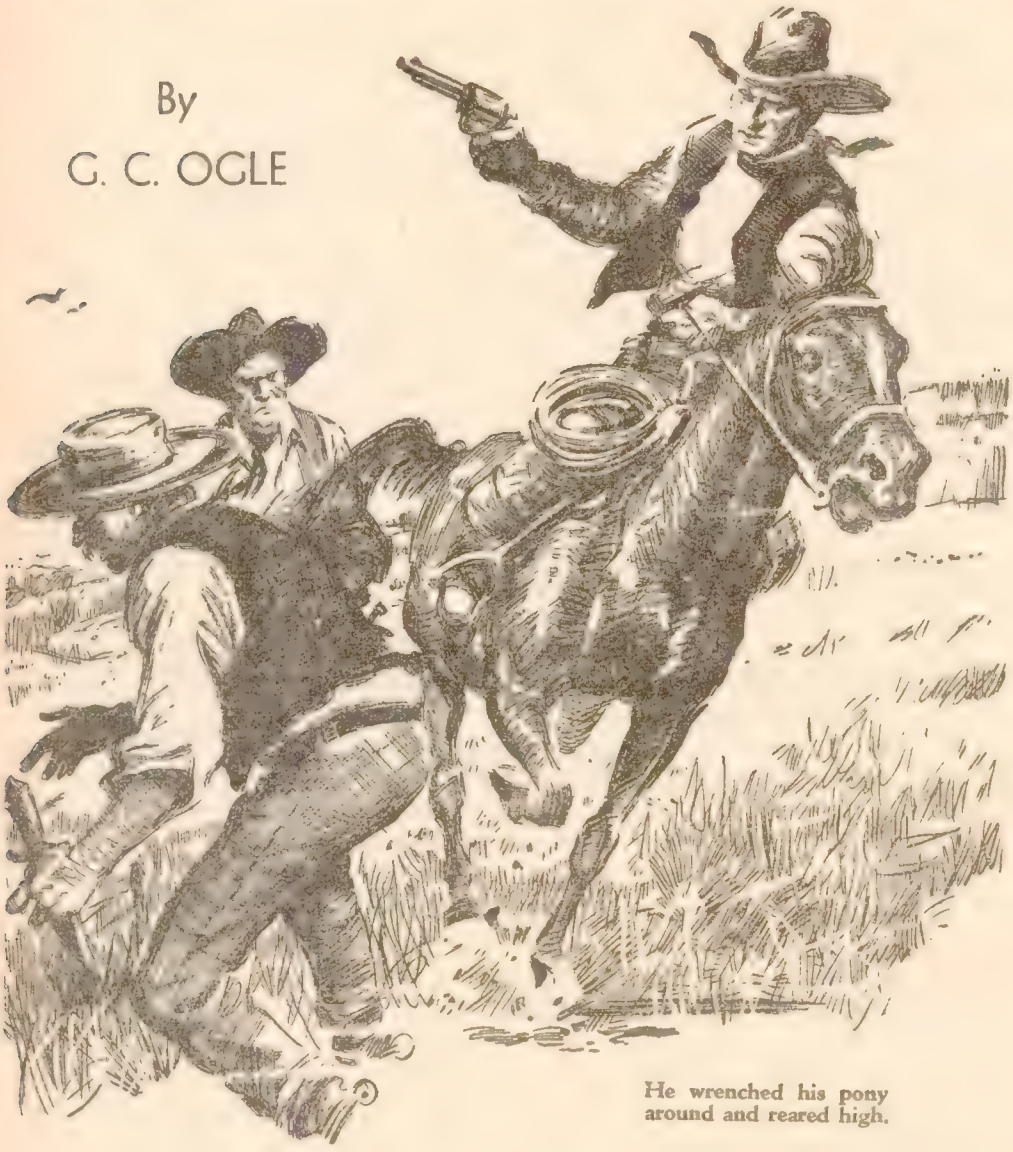
"And so will you, Candy Odams!" Cliff said, and he suddenly felt fine.

The girl smiled impishly up into his face. "If that's a long delayed proposal," she said demurely, "I'll be unladylike enough to accept it right away, and not keep you in suspense."

THE END

Bury That Sheeper Deep!

By
G. C. OGLE



He wrenched his pony around and reared high.

A sheeper needed more than Luke Clanton's defiant courage on the range that tallow-hating Darius Powers claimed as his own. He needed a faithless wife like Bonnie, and a loyal pardner like Jim—who kept on fighting long after he was dead!

AS LUKE CLANTON prepared to drift his flock down to Sweetwater Spring, he was grimly aware that he was inviting trouble. For, after they watered, he intended to shove his sheep down into the unpatented Sundown brakes that lay to the north of his range and to the west of Darius Powers.

The big cattleman, who ran seven thou-

sand head on his Rainbow Ridge spread, ran his stuff in the brakes every autumn, taking advantage of the late feed that grew in the seepy swales. Luke knew that Powers would resent his moving in. But the season was a dry one, and Luke's flock had grown too big for his range. So he either went into the brakes or drifted his flock twenty miles south to the Bald Hills country.

Luke wasn't doing that. Not while there was feed two miles from his shack. He wasn't leaving his wife Bonnie alone all fall—not when Powers had bragged that he'd change her mind yet, even if she had married a stinking sheepman instead of him.

High above, the Siskiyous were punching jagged spires into an August morning that powdered their eastern faces with pale gold. But the purple of the canyons deepened as they slashed down to the valley floor. There the shadows still piled deep beneath the madrone grove where the flock had bedded.

Luke's two shepherds, Ring and Lady, were off on the flanks, waiting for him to give the command to start. They watched him with bright eyes, their ears cocked and their tails wagging. He glanced around, saw that the sheep were all on their feet. His hand sliced down, and he called: "Ring! Lady! Start them moving!"

He leaned forward in his saddle and his skewbald plodded forward. He picked him up to a lope and swung around the flock and down the trail. The dogs scurried around, tongues lolling happily as they got the three thousand sheep moving.

When the flock headed down the trail, Luke reined aside and watched. Yellow dust lazed up under trampling hooves and the sheep bleated their mournful, "Ba-a-ha-a-a," as the dogs nipped at the laggards with a pretended ferocity that roused the squat, rusty creatures to a brief, rocking gallop.

Then above their immemorial, protesting chorus, Luke's ears caught an alien sound. It was a ringing, *Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!* slow, even-spaced, coming from the vicinity of the springs.

The muscles on Luke's square jaw bunched, and his hazel eyes, set beside a proud, high-bridged nose, went bleak. Powers had declared war already.

That *clunking* sound was made by an oak maul driving pickets into sun-baked earth! Next, strands of barbwire would start reeling off the rolls. They would be be stapled to the pickets. And, come sundown, Luke's sheep would be fenced off from the spring!

It was easy to do. The water, after gushing up from beneath a granite outcrop, purled along a couple of hundred yards, then disappeared in a fissure. It emerged half a mile away in Slater canyon. But that was small comfort to Luke and his thirsty sheep. For Powers owned the canyon that watered his broad domain!

Luke's full, handsome mouth thinned. If Powers wanted war, he'd get it! He would accept the challenge, now! He had to water at the spring or he couldn't graze the brakes. And he had more right to than anybody else.

His partner, Jim Barlow, had preempted the claim lying alongside Luke's. Neither had been twenty-one at the time. But Luke proved up on his claim, while easy-going Jim never got around to getting title to the springs before he disappeared three years ago.

Maybe Luke was only a sheepherding nester. And maybe Powers was a cattle king—even if he had heired the spread from hell-spitting old Jake, his iron-fisted paw. But Luke hadn't built up his fine cross-bred flock from the twenty bare-bellied ewes him and Jim had started with twelve years ago, by being overly meek and humble.

You can't be like that and raise sheep in cow country. Not when you and your

breed partner start as a couple of fifteen year-old, fuzzy-jawed kids with patched levis and big ideas. No. You come up the hard way, taking guff from nobody. You fight for your rights with a ferocity that makes hardcases shake their heads in amazement. And nobody laughs twice at your unshaven, lantern jaws.

Your face has filled out now, and the years have lined it, but you remember. . . .

AND Luke hadn't won Bonnie, Jim's clean-limbed, lovely sister, by worshiping her from afar. No. He'd swung her high, wide and handsome in the quadrilles when squeaking fiddles and the caller's singsong commands rang loud over the stomping feet and laughter.

He'd fought for Bonnie, too. He'd swung his fists a dozen times when tipsy cowhands made sneering allusions to her mother after she'd rebuffed their advances. Sure, the old lady was a breed! But she was as honest and good a woman as blue-eyed Bonnie herself. She'd raised her four kids by taking in washing after her scamp of a husband had vamoosed when they were little tykes.

Luke had tangled twice with Powers over Bonnie. The first of the bloody, bruising, knock-'em-down-and-drag-'em-out brawls had occurred before his marriage to Bonnie. The second, a month after.

Both fights had been inconclusive. The Law had separated them, but they'd vowed to meet again and prove once and for all who was the better man.

Luke kept out of Powers' way for two reasons, now. First, Bonnie had made him promise that he'd avoid trouble if he could. The second, and inconsequential one, was that both he and Powers were under bond of a thousand dollars to keep the peace.

But, hell! When a range hog started to fence off your water, promises were absolved, as Luke saw it. And peace bonds didn't count.

Luke put the skewbald to the lope and swung wide around the plodding flock. The shepherds would bring it down all right.

Smoke was starting to plume from his shack a furlong up the slope where the big, glossy-leaved madrone tree flung down cool summer shade. Luke had dug a well there in the shallow draw that ran past his shack and had been rewarded with an abundance of water for the homestead. Bonnie considered it mighty convenient having the vee trough carry water right from the hand pump to the barrel in the kitchen between the stove and the sink. The Barlow kids had lugged water in five gallon coal oil cans for their mother's washing.

Bonnie wasn't standing in the front door as Luke turned expectantly to wave to her. She was probably in the kitchen, readying the breakfast he'd bolt while the dogs held the watering sheep at the spring. His nerves were edgy, and he felt irritated because she wasn't at the door. She must be deaf if she didn't hear that *clunking* sound . . . and slow to understand if she didn't realize what it portended. Hell! Could be, he'd come back dead!

He dug in punishing steel and the skewbald went bolting down the trail. He wondered for the millionth time what had happened to Jim Barlow. His pard had been a square shooter and as game as they come. He could sure do with him right now to side him in the ruckus that loomed ahead.

Luke burst out of the buckbush screen into the forty acre opening around the spring. Fifty yards down the slope he glimpsed Highpockets Bailey and Nub Newman, two of Powers' hands, driving pickets. They already had a dozen standing solid in the ground.

Highpockets was a gangling six-foot-six, with a long, skinny neck and an Adam's apple that kept jumping up and down. He had startled-looking blue eyes,

a hooked, crimson beak, and limp buckskin mustaches that drooped over a coarse mouth.

He stood on a long-legged bench, swinging a maul and driving the picket Nub held. Nub was a tough, runtish, hammered-down lug with a prim little rosebud of a mouth and a blob of a nose set between twinkling black shoebutton eyes.

Luke's eyes speared around fast. Nobody else was in sight. It came to him with grim amusement that Powers must be getting careless, to send only two men to build that fence.

Highpockets and Nub were fair to middling in a fuss. But they'd have to be a hell of a lot better than that to finish the chore they'd started. Neither of them lugged personal artillery, although Winchesters were bucketed on their broncs, standing hitched to a cascara tree twenty yards away.

The two, catching the pound of the skewbald's hooves, wheeled, faced up the slope. And in that split second Luke rashly decided to try to overwhelm the two without burning powder! For down in the canyon, maybe half a mile away, he heard a wagon approaching. It would be bringing the wire. And more men.

The men coming up would be surprised to see Highpockets and Nub lying stretched out, wonder what had hit them. But they wouldn't wonder long. Luke would start throwing lead.

LUKE kept the skewbald charging straight at the bench. As the two stared, gape-jawed, he dragged his long-barreled Frontier Colt and swung it high. Highpockets jumped off the bench and lumbered after Nub, who was already sprinting for his rifle, windmilling his arms and pushing his low-slung belly before him.

Luke's smile was grim as he angled the skewbald at the cascara to cut them off. Hell! They should have separated. He wondered why they didn't yell for help.

Highpockets had overtaken Nub as Luke cut in front of them. He wrenched his pony around and reared high in stirrup. The barrel of his .45 was a blue blur as it sliced down at Highpockets' skull.

The tall, lean rannie ducked instinctively, and the sharp-filed front sight raked down the back of his neck and tore through the collar of his shirt. Highpockets bellowed in pained fury as the red blood spurted.

Again Luke's .45 leaped high. His next smash had to pay off; Nub was close to the hitched ponies and rifles. Again the .45 clubbed down. This time he caught Highpockets a glancing blow on the temple that shook the fellow to the ground. As he staggered back, white-faced and gasping, Luke glimpsed Nub diving for the tree. He couldn't risk that! He had to down him quick!

His shot was a split second late. It only split bark from the little tree.

Then Luke realized with bleak fury that he'd rushed headlong into Powers' trap like a hot-headed fool! Five men came storming out of the brush with guns in their fists! There was no chance to try to outrun their lead; they were between him and his homestead!

Luke wondered if he should try for the brakes, rejected the idea. It was too far across the opening, and he'd run smack into the men coming up with the wagon. He guessed he wouldn't get out of there alive. But he could do one last thing to justify his dying. He could kill Powers!

He'd die then, knowing the scheming devil would never pester Bonnie again!

Luke wondered where the hell the fellow was. He turned in his saddle to stare behind him. Powers would be present. He wouldn't want to miss this.

Then Luke spotted the big rancher easing his half-blood chestnut out of the brush. Powers' five rannies were roaring

down on him now, not more than forty yards away.

Flame would gush from their guns in another instant. He wondered why they hadn't downed him already. Luke ignored them, braced himself to take their lead in his back. He thought he could still kill Powers, even after he took lead.

The cowman was grinning pleasurably. Luke would wipe that insolent smile from his face, aim at the son's broad belly, let him die slow.

Only a split second had passed since Luke spotted Powers. His .45 was lining down, but he'd ignored the one rannie who could upset his plans! As he'd swiveled around, Highpockets reeled forward, and even as his trigger finger tightened, the lanky lug's long arms clamped around his body, jerking the .45's muzzle down!

It roared, and the slug intended for Powers dug deep into the earth. Luke struggled in a frenzy to break Highpockets' iron grip. He got a foot out of stirrup and tried to kick him loose, and he heard Powers bellow: "Ketch him alive, boys! Ketch him alive!"

Luke couldn't fight back effectively. Highpockets was behind him, with those corded arms pinning his own to his side. Luke roweled him viciously, but although Highpockets grunted with pain, he hung on. Then he started leaning back, bracing his long, stilt-like legs, as Luke triggered impotent lead in raging fury.

HIGHPOCKETS kicked the skewbald in the belly and the boogered beast lunged ahead. Luke reeled out of the saddle backward and smashed to the ground, half-stunned, with the lathy lug still on top of him.

Luke fought with the fury of desperation. It was hopeless. Although he got to his feet twice, slugging savagely, the battering fists of Powers's dismounting gunnies smashed him down. He lay on the ground, breathing in long, shuddering gasps, near senseless, as Powers stepped down from his chestnut. He grinned at Luke, showing his even white teeth, and sneered: "So, squawman! You thought you could run your blasted, stinking sheep on my graze, hey? And water them at my spring, hey?"

Luke's eyes were smoldering slits of hate in the purple swellings that were fast closing them as he glared back defiantly at the big, handsome man towering above him.

He hated Powers, would hate him until he died. Not because Powers was a big cattleman. But, because having heired his spread—been born into wealth and power—he though he was the Lord's right hand and privileged to trample on those who were trying to come up the hard way. Why, as Luke saw it, he was just a greedy range hog who couldn't tolerate the thought of a poor man growing big. At least not Luke.

It hurt Luke's aching ribs to speak, but he gasped, "It's not your range, you blasted son! And it's not your water!"

Powers smiled, mockingly.

"Then whose is it, squawman?"

"The brakes are public domain. Free to any man," Luke gasped.

"To any man who is strong enough to take and hold 'em," Powers said haughtily. "And the water? Whose is that?"

"My pard's. Jim Barlow! When he comes back—"

"Jim Barlow," Powers said softly. "When he comes back . . . but he's not coming back, squawman. Not ever! You'll see him, though."

"Eh—see Jim?" Luke gasped. Suddenly comprehending, he cursed. "You've murdered him, you blasted son! Where did you hide his body?"

"Tch, tch," Powers chided gently. "We didn't murder him, did we, Highpockets? The breed was chasing you and

me and Nub, the foam just flyin' from his tushes, and he sorta stumbled and fell. Didn't he, Highpockets?"

"Sure did, Boss," Highpockets confirmed with relish. "I was kinda glad when he did, 'cause he skeered me outta a year's growth, what with his threats and all."

"Where—where is he?" Luke asked.

"Right where you'll be in another minit!" Powers gloated. "You can clasp his bony paw in yourn and die happy, knowin' you're with your pard at last. That's why I laid my trap and told the boys not to gun you. I want you to know where you're going—like the breed did!"

"You—you devil!" Luke gasped. "You threw him into the sink alive!"

Fear laid its icy fingers on his heart. Powers intended to throw him down into the sink—the gloomy fissure that received Sweetwater's rushing tide at the lower end of its short flow across the flat. The water's first sheer drop was into a rock-vaulted chamber thirty feet deep. Beyond that nobody knew what tortuous underground course it followed, for no living thing had ever gone through it. Luke hoped he'd die when he struck the bottom instead of lying there with broken bones to starve.

"No," Powers grinned. "We didn't throw him down. He went the same way you'll go. And some day I'll ride here with your squaw and show her your bones. And she'll laugh. 'Cause she won't regret you. She'll be my woman. I'll give her everything—silks and satins, jewelery—everything but a wedding ring. I couldn't degrade myself by marrying a squaw."

LUKE reeled up, his blind rage overcoming his weakness. He stood there swaying, trying to gather his strength. If he could only smash Powers in the face just once, wipe that gloating, triumphant smile from his lips!

As he stood there on his tottery pins, Powers stepped in and hit him squarely between the eyes. Blood gushed from his nostrils as he crumpled down in a defeated heap. Across vast distances he heard Powers say: "Boys, you know the score. The blasted sheepherder tried to down Highpockets and Nub. And them here on their lawful business, not even lugging iron. What shall we do? Turn him over to the law, or give him our own brand of justice?"

"Hell, Boss!" Highpockets said. "Why waste the county's money? Cost the price of a new rope to hang him!"

The stolid, vindictive ring of Powers' men staring down at Luke chorused profane affirmation.

"And do you want to dig a hole in this hard ground to lay him away in?" Powers softly queried.

"Hell, no!" Highpockets said quickly. "Put him in the sink!"

"Then tie a rope around his belly and lower him down!" Powers commanded harshly. "Then you, Nub, and Highpockets, can run his sheep down into the brakes. I'll hold 'em there till shearing time. Then I'll sift 'em out and dispose of 'em. Reckon the winter rains will wash their stink away before next summer."

So Powers intended to steal Luke's sheep! And he wouldn't even grant him merciful, quick death!

Luke felt himself being lowered into the bowels of the earth. There was a roaring in his ears as the walling water pounded down into the arched cavern. Then he was lying on a sloping rock shelf three feet above the pool where foam patches slowly circled until they disappeared through the black fissure at the lower end.

The hitch was jerked loose and the rope went snaking up. Mocking, triumphant laughter flooded the echoing cavern. Then there was no sound but the roar of the waters.

Luke drifted into stupor. An hour later

he stirred, moaned and rolled off the narrow shelf, and went sliding into the pool. Its icy coldness shocked him into awareness before he strangled; instinctively he drove for the surface.

He poked his head out and gulped air into his starved lungs, then swam slowly around the pool looking for a way to get out. A sloping shelf ran down on the back side and he scrambled painfully up it. Now he was behind the waterfall. Light filtered through the falling curtain and he saw he was in a half-round recess ten feet wide at its deepest.

Then he stared in chill horror at the grinning skeleton that leered at him! The pitiful huddle of bleached bones was close to the wall nearest the opening above, where, for a brief time each day, the sun's rays could stab down and touch them. Then a man leaning down could see them and gloat. Luke swore that when he lay down to die, it would be behind the waterfall, out of sight.

It would be soon enough. He had no hope of getting out alive, he could never climb those curving walls. And even if a friend did pass by, the roar of the waters would drown the sound of his voice. No. He was a gone gosling.

He believed the skeleton was Jim's, but he had to be sure. He wouldn't mind being with Jim while he thought his last long thoughts, for Jim had been the squarest, finest pard a man ever had. Maybe if he talked over old times with him, it would keep him from going mad.

Luke leaned down. Yes. It was Jim. He knew by the wide space between the two front upper teeth, by the bone-handled .45 holstered in the brass-studded belt that lay unbuckled on the ground.

But why was the claspknife with its broad blade worn down to nearly to the hilt, still clenched in the bony fist? Luke stared up, wondering. And hope surged in his heart like heady wine! Maybe he would live! Live, because he'd had a pard who never gave up; who'd fought on doggedly until he died!

JIM had been so close to success, so near to escape from his living tomb! A cleft ran up diagonally from the back of the cave, and at its top was a big rock slab whose flat bottom was the roof of the cave.

Luke remembered it. It was about five feet wide on top. He'd tried several times to tip it over, just to hear it splash in the pool, but it had been too well supported from the bottom.

Now it no longer had that support, for Jim had clung up there in the cleft and patiently dug beneath it, worn his claspknife to the hilt gouging out the seamed granite and hard clay. A little more, and the slab would come sliding down. Then a man with strong arms could swing out to the sun and life!

Jim's strength had failed him at the very end. He'd clung there and dug until he'd come plunging down to his death. How many times had he fallen, and got doggedly up, and tried again? Luke shivered, thinking about it.

He felt ashamed of himself for having thought of giving up without a fight. He would take up where his pard left off, and he would get out before his strength failed.

Clinging to the cleft with his left hand, his right reached up to the rock, testing it. It teetered, nearly off balance! Luke began sweating. Should he keep digging, or put all his strength in one effort to start the slab sliding down?

He grabbed the projecting spur and dragged down, straining with every ounce of strength in his body. His fingers clutching the cleft grew numb. But they had to hold fast, he couldn't fall now. If he broke a bone in his leg he'd be company for Jim's skeleton!

The slab began to tilt, slowly at first, then faster. It began to grind ahead, gathered speed, and went plunging into

the pool with a thunderous splash!

Luke clung there in the cleft until he stopped trembling. Then he reached up and his searching fingers found a depression in the rock. In five seconds more he stood upright in the morning sun, delivered from the tomb to which Darius Powers had sentenced him!

His flock had already disappeared down the trail. Down below the opening he saw lazing dust, heard the barking of Ring and Lady, and the protesting, bleating chorus of three thousand sheep.

Luke grinned in sardonic amusement. Let Powers' men herd sheep! It would be something to make the jay birds laugh when he told it later.

Right now he wanted to get back to his shack. A pot of hot java and fried spuds and sowbelly—and the sight of Bonnie—would put him in fighting trim again. Then he'd plan his next battle with Powers.

His skewbald had disappeared, probably headed back for the barn. Luke went slogging up the trail, angled across to the madrone grove where his flock had bedded last night.

As he neared the trail that ran to the settlement, he heard ambling ponies' hooves on the sun-baked ground. Then came voices. One of them was Bonnie's. He thrilled as he heard her low, throaty laugh.

Then his heart froze to stone! The voice that spoke next was Darius Powers! Luke crouched down in the screening brush like a wounded animal. His fingernails dug into his palms and his teeth bit into his lips. He never tasted the blood that oozed from them.

All his being was in his stricken, staring eyes. Bonnie was smiling at Powers as she rode past! She had a stuffed bag tied behind her saddle's cantle. She was leaving him! Leaving with the man who had tried to murder her husband!

Luke's hand plummeted to his holstered .45. Then he groaned, let his taw slide back. He couldn't kill Bonnie. And he wouldn't down Powers with one merciful bullet. That range hog had to die slowly, under his throttling fingers, knowing why he died and who choked his life out.

The two riders swung around the bend, and the sound of the jogging hooves and the voices died away. Luke was alone. All he had left was his implacable hatred for Powers and the misery of knowing he'd lost Bonnie.

HE STUMBLED wearily back to the shack. As he passed the barn he glanced in. The skewbald stood there, unsaddled, and he reasoned that Bonnie must have learned that he was in trouble when his pony came back without him.

Luke ate the breakfast still waiting on the stove. The spuds and meat tasted like ashes, but he ate them, knowing he had to keep his strength up. He owed it to Jim to settle his account with Powers in full.

Afterwards, he went outside, to think. He heard the muted roar of the waterfall in the cavern, and for the first time he wondered where Sweetwater's flow came from.

Then he knew in a blinding flash! It ran underground across his homestead! Right down beneath the shallow draw outside the shack, from distant springs back in the mountains!

It was his water! No range hog had a right to fence him off from it! His present well tapped the flow.

The draw ran straight down the gentle slope until it met the granite outcrop that thrust up in the middle of Luke's front pasture. Then it made a right angle turn and wandered off west, down the steepening slope that narrowed, to become Firestone canyon, a waterless gully in summer. A high, barren ridge separated it from the brakes and the beginning of Slater canyon, which watered Powers'

spread. . . . He stood deep in thought.

If Luke could somehow turn that underground stream into the dry gully and send Sweetwater's flow down Firestone. . . . It looked impossible, but Jim had attempted the impossible, and Luke was alive now because of Jim's efforts. He owed it to his pard to try.

Luke walked down to the outcrop and put his ear to the ground. Yes! Water gurgled down there! How deep he didn't know, but he'd find out. . . .

It took Luke ten nights to dig the trench from the well he first dug above the outcrop. He worked at night because it was cooler and he didn't want to be seen. He worked from dusk until dawn, driving himself to the limit of his strength and endurance. He was in a hurry. Then he'd stagger to the shack, snatch a bite to eat, and fall into the drugged sleep of exhaustion.

Nobody came near the shack. His sheep were in the brakes, tended by Highpockets and Nub. He turned the skewbald out to forage for himself. He wanted nothing to interfere with his digging.

Finally the water started to flow down his trench. He deepened it until its level was below the hole the water had broken through the rotten granite of the outcrop. He filled that with yellow clay. The next morning the roaring waterfall was muted to a whisper. He walked down and saw but a bare trickle spilling over its lip.

Now all Luke had to do was to wait, gathering his drained strength for what must come. A scorching hot August slid wearily into a hotter September. The whole country lay parched and panting under the searing drought. A little water still trickled out of the underground stream into the brakes, but further east, Slater canyon was a succession of stagnant, green-scummed pools. By the middle of the month even these were gone. Only dirty brown dry scum that crackled under the hooves of thirsty, bawling cattle, sniffing in vain for some water, remained.

Luke slipped down one night and examined his sheep. They were ganted. But they should last another week. Then he'd water them in the draw, or he'd be dead and it wouldn't matter . . .

Powers and his crew attacked at dawn. Luke had figured they would. He watched Highpockets and Nub ride into the opening the evening before and stare at the trench. Then Luke's close-pitched lead had sent them scurrying.

Three mounted men, wide-spaced, and hunched low in saddle, angled in toward the shack's front door at a driving run. Luke glimpsed two more off to the left. There'd be others behind the shack. He fired three times as fast as he could crank his repeater. Two ponies galloped away, their riders down on the ground, clawing at the dirt. The third pony screamed in agony as it folded its front legs and went ploughing ahead on his nose. His rider catapulted over and lit on his shoulder.

Luke didn't have time to wait to see if he'd get up. Already men were surging against the back door.

"Get that axe!" somebody bellowed. Luke swore wordlessly. He'd forgotten to hide his axe! Outside, there was a bedlam of shouted curses and blasting gunfire as lead smashed through the boarded-up windows.

AT THE SAME time the axe began battering the door, two men scrambled up onto the roof. Luke held his fire a second. Then the door splintered.

Luke fired once through the roof, then loosed powder twice through the door's opening crack. A man screamed. Another slammed against the wall and began retching.

At the same time the two on the roof triggered lead through the hole they had smashed. Slugs dug the floor all around Luke and snarled off the cook stove he stumbled behind.

Instantly the two on the roof dropped to the floor and charged him, thinking him wounded. Powers' triumphant, laughing snarl blared out, and Highpockets giggled tinnily. Luke's rifle muzzle was nearly touching the lathy rannie's belly when he pulled trigger.

Luke wrenched desperately at his repeater's lever. He was too late. Powers was on him in a battering rush as he came up out of his crouch to meet the heavier man, who drove him backward and to the floor.

It was bestial savagery, not pretty to watch. But there was nobody to watch except the dead and dying. If there had been men in Powers' storming party Luke had not accounted for, they'd slunk off.

All but the runtish Nub who'd smashed off his death-struck pony out front! He'd reeled up, then climbed in the half-open front window Luke had fought from. And even as Powers went limp under Luke's throttling fingers, Nub leered down at the two locked in their death struggle!

He dragged his taw, and grinned.

Luke couldn't do a thing. He was still throttling Powers, and he'd take him with him if he could. He thought bleakly: "So this is it. My best wasn't good enough. But . . . but Jim will understand."

The hammer of Nub's .45 never dropped. There was a roaring in Luke's ears, and Nub spread-eagled on the floor! Luke turned his head, gasped in awe at Bonnie standing in the kitchen door with a smoking .45 clenched in her tiny fist!

Luke dazedly levered up from Powers' form. It no longer twitched. He gasped. "You . . . Bonnie! I . . . I thought—"

She stared at Powers briefly, and asked, "Is the murdering snake dead?"

"I—I think so," Luke said confusedly. "But, you rode away with him that morning . . . he . . . he'd just thrown me in the sink to starve, and you were laughing as you rode away. Bonnie . . . Bonnie! Tell me the truth! I . . . missed you so."

Luke was near bawling. His wife's blue eyes were misty as she explained: "Powers brought word that my mother was sick and wanted to see me. He was very kind. He saddled my pony while I got ready. I was laughing because I was so happy when he told me that you and he were friends now, and that you could graze the brakes. I'd been so worried about that.

"The lying snake!" Luke gritted. "But . . . but you stayed away so long, Bonnie!"

"I was hurt, Luke, when you didn't come to see me. I'd left a note on the table for you. Mother really was sick. And you never answered the letters I sent up by that little runt lying there dead."

"I never saw the note, Bonnie! I never got the letters. I swear it!"

"I remember now that Powers turned back after I came out . . . wanted to be sure the stove was banked safely.

"Powers stayed in town all the time and was so kind to me that I almost got to liking him. Then yesterday Nub wondered, sort of sniggering, if you'd left the country. And Powers replied angrily: 'No! Luke would never do that! God! I wonder if he's fallen in the sink! You ride up right away, Nub, and take a good look!'

"It was late last night when he came back. He was all excited when he talked to Powers. I guessed something had happened when they left in a tearing hurry, so I decided to forget my hurt pride and come see what you were doing. I started before daylight. Luke! If I'd been a minute later—"

The color drained from her face and she trembled. Luke took her in his arms, and as she clung to him, she whispered, "Nothing matters now, Luke. I'm with you, in our home."

The old man had him right smack in his sights.

Jim O'Leary figured it would take too long to cut down, one by one, Marty Agnew's dread killer crew. Instead, he'd split the gang in two and start them throwing lead. . . . Then, like the reckless, to-hell-with-living fool he was, walk between 'em toward a really man-sized job!

THIRTEEN KILLERS TO GO!

Rip-Roaring Action Novelette

By H. FREDERIC YOUNG

CHAPTER ONE

Who Killed my Dad?

THE old fellow, who had gray tobacco-stained whiskers and blue nervous eyes and hunched tired shoulders, peered cautiously above the riverbank mesquite and lifted the lever-action Winchester. Apparently the stranger with the square, powerful shoulders did not know he was being watched.

The old man had sighted the newcomer at the river bend when he was still a

quarter mile away. He had watched him trot the big roan stallion right smack toward him through the calm, foot-deep water of the sandy river. He had him in his sights now.

The big roan stallion was having a drink. The blond young giant astride him, a lazy, amiable looking person dressed in new corduroy breeches and tanned calf-high boots and a gray shirt unbuttoned half down to his waist, leaned back against the bulky saddle-roll and grinned at the stallion's twitching ears. His gray eyes hardened and thinned, but the curious smile remained on his lips. The roan's ears twitched some more.

"Come out from behind me," the stranger called, pleasantly enough but with something commanding in his tone.

Old Man McAuliffe jumped as though a cactus thorn had jabbed the seat of his pants. His scraggly whiskers jerked, his nostrils rabbited noisily.

"Ye're in private territory!" he snapped. "Git!" He jerked back the rifle hammer with a hooked, dirty thumb.

"Best I recollect," drawled the young stranger lazily and with humor, " a river is a right-of-way owned and controlled by the state."

Oops! thought McAuliffe, startled. I gotta smart one this time. He snarled, "We're too danged far away from the state to bring that up!" Then he scowled almost plaintively. "G'wan, now, be a nice feller and git." He still had the rifle cocked. He stepped forward a few paces and stood at the edge of the lapping water. His pants were baggy and his bootheels bent, producing a sprung-hinge effect in his knee-joints. There was a thousand fears in his mind, and one of them was that the young stranger would turn out to be stubborn, and would not ride peacefully away.

The man on the roan eased around slowly. He measured McAuliffe pro and con; and presently his strong lips quirked with rich humor that was wry and yet grim. He said, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Jim O'Leary, and as one good Irishman to another—"

"Irish!" huffed the old man, "Irish! It's Scots I am, and not a heathen Irish! Name of McAuliffe!" He scratched his stubbed chin. "O'Leary, hey!" He brandished his rifle.

"The same," said young O'Leary, eyes hard. Fierce emotions were like smoldering coals behind those eyes, ready to flare into raging life.

"Git!" whispered McAuliffe shakily. "Git, git, git—if ye're the O'Leary I'm thinkin' about!"

"Y'know," drawled Jim O'Leary politely, "I've a mind to gut-shoot you, just like you stand. If it wasn't for the fact that you know things I want to know, by hell I'd do just that!" His bold eyes stared the old man down.

"YE SPEAK like a reasonable man, O'Leary," McAuliffe sputtered. "Then lissen to a man long past yer own years. It's wise ye'll be if ye take my word. Git! Ye look honest and respectable, which makes it all the worser."

"Looks are deceitful, y'know," O'Leary reminded him quietly.

There was a spark of interest in McAuliffe's eyes. "Yeah. . . . Could be you ain't the O'Leary I'm thinkin' of. Maybe ye're runnin' from the law. . . ." He licked his lips.

"Maybeso there's a reward on my hide. That it?"

"Ye're big Quin O'Leary's son, ain'tcha? Quin over an' over ye are, by skittlefish! Quick. Ye better git!"

Young O'Leary laughed. "You knew Quin O'Leary?"

"I ain't sayin'," McAuliffe said half frightened. "But ye're a fool for comin' here. Big Quin was hung legal and proper."

"For murder!"

McAuliffe squirmed his feet into the sand. "Ye oughtn't to know so much. It'll get ye into trouble."

"I know this!" snapped Jim O'Leary heatedly. "My old man died as a result of a trumped-up murder charge! His estate—The Yellow Sock Mine—was disposed of to satisfy his debts."

"All accordin' to law an' order," McAuliffe argued weakly. "It's all in the book writ down by lawyers. It sounds like hokum, and I don't savvy it, but it's the law. Besides, the shaft wasn't any good—then."

"Hah! But it's good now!"

"Well. . . it's been developed."

"And it's worth a cool million!" O'Leary snapped.

"Umph! Mebbe half that," McAuliffe mumbled. "But it's no use now. Ever'thing was done neat an' tidy accordin' to law an' order."

O'Leary said crisply, "T'hell with that, mister. I'm on my way to stake a claim in the middle of what's rightly mine. You gonna stand in my way?"

McAULIFFE wrinkled his forehead in the effort to produce a suitable reply. There was something about young O'Leary that warned him to use some caution.

With apparent carelessness, young O'Leary tapped the roan lightly with his heel on the offside, forcing the animal around. The next instant he reared stiff-kneed in the stirrups and the stallion rose up on its quarters and sprang like a cat pouncing on a sparrow. McAuliffe staggered back, waving his rifle defensively as O'Leary plummeted from the saddle and crashed shoulder-first into the old man's midriff.

"Woomph!" MaAuliffe snorted, not particularly hurt because he was a tough old coot from head to toe. He squirmed and bucked and yelped and chewed up a pack of sand. His hat made a loop forward and rolled lazily into the river. O'Leary's big frame was squeezing McAuliffe into the riverbank sand, holding him while one of his big feet kicked the rifle out of reach.

At this moment a pretty blonde girl screamed angrily and came running out of the mesquite. She hopped behind O'Leary and began clubbing his head with browned clenched fists. "Stop! Stop! Stop, you big, cowardly lout, stop!"

O'Leary looked at her. He wasn't seeing the pretty side of her now, for her lips were curled in anger and her features were twisted with savage emotion.

"Hold it!" O'Leary yelled at her. "I'm not hurtin' him. I'm just holding him so he won't hurt himself!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" she screamed, and smashed at O'Leary's bobbing head.

"Git away, Nettie!" McAulie sputtered. "Ye're always buttin' into a man's fight. Leave it to a female! Kick her on the chin, O'Leary!"

O'Leary grinned down at McAuliffe. "Want to call a truce?" he asked.

McAuliffe struggled vainly, sputtering curses between his clenched teeth. "Ye're dealin' from the bottom of the deck, ye cussed sidewinder," he snorted. "What else c'n I say? Yes!"

O'Leary clambered nimbly to his feet, blinking round at the girl, the anger washing out of him as swiftly as it had come moments ago.

"You big overgrown bully!" the girl said huskily. She reached over and gave McAuliffe a hand.

The old man stood up, brushing sand from his clothes.

"Ye're quick," he told O'Leary approvingly, "Like a zip of lightnin', ye are quick."

"Quit talking to the big bruiser, Pa," Nettie McAuliffe said. "Come on home. Supper will be ready, time you clean up."

"Go 'way, Nettie," McAuliffe growled. "I'll be home later. Me an' O'Leary got

some important business to discuss."

Nettie McAuliffe grabbed her father's arm. "You're coming with me right now," she said determinedly. She jerked him along.

Old man McAuliffe sniffed, then followed. "Yer invited up to supper, young fella," he called back over his shoulder. "Up the hill from the school house in town. Log house with a white picket fence. Y'can't miss it. Yaller dog in the front yard—shut up, Nettie!" His voice faded into the mesquite. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

You're Not Welcome!

JIM O'LEARY stared at amusement after the pair. He muttered under his breath, "And then the beast walked in on beauty. . . ." Then he remembered the grim thing that had brought him here. He squatted on his quarters and twisted up a smoke, his face morose and thoughtful.

Despite his hulky proportions, inside Jim O'Leary was a hair-trigger nervousness comparable to the tenseness of all pure-bred beasts. And danger was as much a part of him as his ears, or his capable fists or feet. He was in his early twenties, more skeptical than cynical, and his humor and gruffness were a direct hand-me-down from his old man—pick-and-shovel, rough-and-ready, Big Quin O'Leary. Although he was kind he usually ignored accepted conventions.

When he had received the letter in Denver, written in elegant law terms and oozing with sympathy, which notified him that, "enclosed herewith, please find check in sum of four hundred dollars and twenty-nine cents, in legal settlement of your father's estate, one Quin O'Leary, as duly probated by the Justice Court of Powder County. . . ." the angered son of Quin O'Leary wasted only thirty seconds making a decision.

He cashed the check and purchased an outfit suitable for traveling to Powder County.

He sat now, brooding about his father. Not a simpering, helpless kind of brooding, but a savage kind, revengeful and remorseless. He made meaningless marks in the sand with a finger, and then chuckled wryly at the thought of eating supper with McAuliffe and his spitfire daughter. . . .

The name of the town was Nugget City, and he circled it twice, keeping well upslope in the pines. For though the exhilaration of adventure was his weakness, his sense of danger was well-sharpened.

The town was squeezed down inside a sheer-sloped gulch. Jogging patiently along a branching terrace a hundred yards above the rooftops, O'Leary charted the place in his mind. The unpainted frame houses were built on small levels scooped out, and some were reached by zig-zag dirt paths while others had plank stairs reaching from the street level to their front stoops.

Before dropping down to street level, O'Leary searched out the building that looked most like a schoolhouse, then found the whitish blur of a fence. He headed the roan down a narrow, rocky path.

A few faces watched O'Leary canter along the main street of Nugget City. Whiskey-loosened voices seeping from the saloons made a jumbled refrain that he scarcely heard, Quin O'Leary had walked this street once, and now his flesh was mingling with the dust. Young O'Leary gave a jerky sigh, observing everything with a cool, external calm and a squinty gaze. *Pa won't rest until things are rectified,* he thought. *He'll tramp this gulch day and night and, dammit, I'll give his bones some peace if I have to fight like hell to do it!*

Everybody figured the stranger would eventually alight to quench his thirst and swap yarns, and were therefore surprised when he passed the last saloon and kept riding.

Winding up a single horse trail, O'Leary stopped the roan in front of the white fence and draped the reins over a picket. A yellow dog bellied toward him, tail whipping happily to-and-fro as though to brush a clean path for the supper guest.

But the blonde-headed girl, Nettie, nearly mashed his nose flat slamming the door in his face.

"You beat it!" she snapped.

O'LEARY'S big foot argued its way inside the door. Already it was half way across the axe-hewn threshhold, and as the door whammed shut it banged against his foot and rebounded wildly.

"You're not a very hospitable woman," O'Leary observed dryly, and a grin crinkled his eyes. He glanced apologetically down at Nettie, who had been knocked flat by the rebounding door. He was laughing pleasantly as he reached down and scooped her to her feet.

Nettie McAuliffe's cheeks flamed with heated embarrassment.

"I'm here for supper, ma'am," O'Leary said, striding past the girl and plopping down in a rocking chair. "Where's Pop?"

"Comin' up!" McAuliffe snorted from a basin of water on the back porch.

Nettie glared in exasperation, her fists doubled at her slender waist. She wore a starched linen frock, and her hair was done in braids as yellow as ripe wheat. Young O'Leary had never seen a face so dauntless, yet so feminine, in his life. She glanced at him, frowning, then strode saucily away.

McAuliffe walked into the room scrubbing the back of his neck with a towel. He paced stiffly around the room with a grin on his face, yanking down the green window shades. He squinted at O'Leary. "Ain't ashamed of havin' you in my house," he explained, "but if you ain't seen you won't be recognized as you high-tail it outa the country after grub."

At those words Nettie came from the kitchen. "You're just going to make more trouble for us than we already have," the girl said anxiously. "You'd be doing us a favor if you got out of here and left town right now."

"On an empty stomach!" O'Leary groaned.

She stamped her foot angrily, then went back to her kitchen.

O'Leary heard the angry thump and bang of kettles. He grinned blandly at the old man.

"Just so there won't be any misunderstanding," he said crisply, "I'm not hitting the trail!"

Old man McAuliffe bobbed his withered Adam's apple. He said, "I wisht I could convince ye to."

"That's not the way I learned to solve problems in school, Pop. I can call you Pop, can't I? Good! Make me feel more at home." He stretched lustily and relaxed his trail-weary muscles.

"So!" McAuliffe growled. "Ye been edjicated!" He glared suspiciously at his guest.

O'Leary sobered. "Why do you think my Old Man ratted around all his life swinging a pick and swishing a gold pan for? He wanted me to have the finer things of life."

"He was that kind of a man," McAuliffe admitted gingerly.

EXCITEMENT flashed in the youth's eyes. "You knew him that well?" McAuliffe nodded with a bleak expression. Stormy anger bit into the flesh of O'Leary's face. "Then whyinhell did'ja stand by and let them slap a bum murder around his neck?" He was on his

feet, clenching his fists, towering over McAuliffe.

"What c'n one old man do agin Marty Agnew an' his herd of cut-throats?"

"You're the law!" O'Leary strode impatiently round the room. His eyes rolled wildly and the breath hissed through his snarling lips.

McAuliffe cackled a miserable laugh. "A phony law."

"Phony?"

"Phony as a chunk of fool's gold bigger'n yer fist!" McAuliffe yelled back at him. "I was appointed marshal hereabouts agin my better will an' judgement," he continued moodily, "But what chance has a old codger like me agin Marty Agnew? Marty's a ruthless scoundrel, an' he plays a killer' game for what he wants. He's bigger'n ye are, O'Leary, an' his lips are flat from wallopin's, but he's still meaner'n a Mex on a marijuana jag. Marty's the law and jedge almighty in Powder County, and he's got a hired gang of bushwhackers number o' thirteen that'd rather skittle yer innards than—"

"Thirteen!" O'Leary exploded. He smiled amusedly. "Now I wonder, by jeepers, who that'd be unlucky for? Marty Agnew or Quin O'Leary's boy Jim?"

The old man scowled reprovingly. "Make yer jokes now, me big bucko. Ye won't be makin' many if ye stick in Nugget City."

"So you're a forced law?" mused O'Leary. Then his eyes twinkled merrily. "By hell, Pop you're the law in any event. And it's within your legal power to appoint a deputy! That right?"

McAuliffe crossed and uncrossed his legs several times. He grunted, "Now looka here, O'Leary!"

"Answer me quick like a rabbit, man!"

McAuliffe mopped sweat from his forehead. "Yeah. Sure. But ye're gettin' yer brains all mixed up, young fella. If ye wanna git yer head blowed into little chunks of meat, just lemme pin a deppity badge on yer shirt."

"Go on!" O'Leary laughed uproarously. "Pin it on me, Pop! I'll show you how to toss thirteen rats in a pen so fast it'll make you blink!"

CHAPTER THREE

Like My New Star?

JIM O'LEARY polished the star on his shirt with the sleeve of his jacket. It was full dark now, a night sky pinned up with a million diamond studs. He had a belly full of some of the finest grub he'd ever had the good fortune to encounter.

A born optimist when it came to any brand of trouble, Jim strolled casually down one side of the main street, crossed over and ambled back the other side, with two reasons knocking together in his mind. It was going to be advantageous, he calculated, to know every nook and cranny of the place; and secondly, he wished to display his badge of authority before spreading his rat poison.

He arrived back at the end of the street atfer completing his circuit, and stood splay-footed, twirling a big chunk of gold hooked to the end of his watch chain.

He'd pried some useful information out of McAuliffe. The Miner's Club Bar was the hangout spot for Marty Agnew's crew and was, furthermore, owned by Agnew, used as his office and, upstairs at the rear, was the apartment where he lived. A dozen other saloons were strung up and down the street, though none were quite so pretentious as Agnew's.

Fifty yards up the north slope was the local jail. It was a sturdy rock building, McAuliffe had told him. O'Leary scanned the darkened heights wondering if McAuliffe was waiting there as he had promised.

O'Leary shrugged indifferently and strolled toward Agnew's saloon.

Some people would have said—and did say afterward—that O'Leary was a blundering idiot, and their say would have gone undisputed regardless of the result achieved.

O'Leary was smilingly admitted to Agnew's saloon, and graciously allowed to lean against the long mahogany bar and order up.

"Beer," O'Leary said thirstily. "A large glass of it."

Kirsten was the barkeep's name. Kirsten spat hastily on the floor behind the bar and scrubbed it with the sole of his shoe.

"No beer," he said in a flat tone.

O'Leary sighed disappointedly. His eyes moved lazily around the long room. In the rear was a group of tables with green felt tops. Four men at one of the tables were high-spading for big stakes of gold dust. A half dozen men were grouped at the far end of the bar. The place was lighted with many polished brass kerosene lamps suspended on wires from the painted rafters. Moths and night bugs beat frantic wings doggedly around the lamps.

"Look," said O'Leary, pointing with the finger of his left hand.

Kirsten, scowling, followed O'Leary's finger and saw a large moth making an endless journey between lamps.

O'Leary grinned, then made a delicate motion with his right hand and suddenly his gun roared out. The startled barkeep watched the powdery remains of the moth drift to the floor.

"You put a hole in the roof!" Kirsten yelled, cursing.

"Ah!" O'Leary said. "By Juniper, if there isn't another moth fixing to light right smack dab on your dome."

Kirsten slapped frantically at the top of his head.

"Beer," O'Leary said quietly. "A large glass of it."

Kirsten made a wooden grin and jerked out a glass and flooded it over from the spigot. He placed the foaming glass shakily on the bar top.

O'LEARY'S gray-green eyes stared deep into the shifty, washed ones of Kirsten. The barkeep had black hair greased down until it shone like polished teak. Though mean and sneaky, Kirsten wasn't a man to suggest danger, so O'Leary tabbed him as one of Agnew's smaller lackeys.

"Them as looks for trouble c'n usually find it!" Kirsten whispered hoarsely.

"Trouble?" O'Leary said stoutly. "You got me wrong, Mister! All wrong! Why would a peace officer be looking for trouble? Fact is—" He searched one pocket then another and finally from a hip pocket produced a wadded piece of paper. He spread it on the bar top and ironed out the wrinkles with meticulous care, peering intently. He squinted at the name heading a list of names scrawled on the paper. "Marty Agnew. I'm looking for Marty Agnew." He glanced up. "Anybody here know a fella called Marty Agnew?"

Breath sucked in sharply around the room. O'Leary stared with a lost-in-the-woods blandness, his lips curled hopefully.

"Marty Agnew ain't in town," Kirsten said.

"Luck! Now ain't that the dangest piece of luck!" O'Leary snorted in disgust. He groped through his pockets again and from a vest pocket his big fingers extracted a stub of pencil. O'Leary licked the pencil lead and squinted down at the paper. Very painfully opposite the name Marty Agnew he scribbled the one word "absent". He stuck the pencil between his lips and nibbled thoughtfully. He kept peering at the second name on the list while the room gave no sound except the hum of insects and the occasional creak of a chair. He finally glanced up. "Now, in the absence of Marty Agnew, I

understand Whitey Gillette conducts business."

The mention of business brought a humming undertone into the room's expectant hush.

"What kind of business, Mister?" asked a voice from the table in the rear of the room. "What's settin' on yore mind?"

A lanky, hollow-chested man got on his feet and moved toward O'Leary with a gliding stride, his huge-roweled spurs clanking on the floor. His punched-back Stetson revealed a mop of shaggy yellow hair and he had prickly eyebrows the same color. His small eyes were bluish with tricky darker lights. Whitey Gillette was Agnew's right hand man because he was considered the fastest gun-hand in town. He was wanted by the law from the Rio Grande to Calgary, Canada. He faced O'Leary with a sneering leer jerking at his lips.

"What kind of business?" Gillette repeated.

"The kind of business you're interested in," O'Leary said, grinning mysteriously. He glanced around. "It's a bit public right here to discuss a big deal. Perhaps you got a private room?"

"We c'n oblige you on that score," Gillette said quietly. He turned and retraced his steps. He nodded toward the poker table and said, "Come along, Hap."

A thick-chested man with short bowed arms and black beard stubble kicked back his chair and stretched like a jungle cat, grinning at O'Leary.

O'Leary offered no objection, verbally or by expression, though this man was not included in his immediate plans. O'Leary's coolness seemed a vague taunt, as with quick, light steps he followed the two men through a long hallway. They entered a small room furnished with a round poker table, several tall brass spittoons, and chairs with well-worn arms.

Gillette stood smiling while Hap waited for O'Leary to pass inside the room, then closed the door and blocked it with his spraddle-legged figure.

"Well?" Gillette said softly. His smile was gone. "Just what the hell is eatin' at yore innards, fella?"

"Why—" O'Leary drawled, then his knees bent and snapped straight and he was whirling at Gillette. He crashed backwards into the man, stooping to get his shoulder beneath Gillette's chin. Then O'Leary's fingers clasped behind Gillette's head and his huge body heaved, lifting Gillette clear of the floor and hurtling him through the air to land feet-first into Hap.

Gillette screamed insanely and snapped out a gun.

O'Leary had expected that, and he was upon both men now, grabbing them and beating their heads together until their knees buckled and they dropped at his feet.

"Hm!" O'Leary grunted. "It can't be this easy all the way!"

He inspected the room, saw a window at the back end. He opened the window and dumped the two men into the alley. Leaping nimbly through the aperture, he scooped a man up under each arm and began staggering up the slope, grunting loudly at each stride.

FIFTY yards later, O'Leary was panting like a dog. He decided to leave Hap behind and return after lodging Gillette in a cell. In five minutes he aproached the jail, scowling to himself because the place was dark.

"McAuliffe!" he called cautiously. He shifted his burden to rest his muscles.

"O'Leary?" he heard faintly, then a figure strode forward. "By hell, I figgered ye was plumb loco. Guess I still think it. Ye ketched one of 'em, but hell's feathers, they's twelve left. Ye're a fool, O'Leary! Give it up as a bad job an' skee-

diddle yerse'f outa here pronto like a buzz-fly."

"Don't get beside yourself with pity for me, Pop," O'Leary chuckled. "I'm having more fun than a donkey in a hay loft."

"Hah!" snorted McAuliffe humorlessly. "An' how do ye plan to git yerse'f down outa the hay loft. It's a donkey that ye are, right enough; ye're that stubborn."

"We're wasting good time," O'Leary said grimly. "The head rat it outa town. I got to collect a few of these mice before he gets back."

The old man craned his neck and squinted at the limp figure in O'Leary's arms.

"That ain't a mouse ye got there," he croaked. "In case ye're ignorant of the fact, that's Whitey Gillette."

"Lead the way, Pop," O'Leary urged. "My strength is leaking outa me. I got another one down the hill." He laughed and staggered after McAuliffe.

He dropped Gillette on a steel cot, locked the jail door, and jammed the key in his pocket.

"Keep a candle in the window for me, Pop. I'll be back quick like a skittle-fly!"

He knew where he had left Hap. But Hap wasn't there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Now Let's Shoot for Keeps

ALL of a sudden, O'Leary knew the fun was over. There was plenty at stake, and he did not intend being second best in a killer's game.

His father had been hanged not so many months ago, and though true it may have been that Big Quin killed a man, murder was strictly out. McAuliffe had sworn to that.

Big Quin had made a strike that promised wealth. But Big Quin was a man with many friends, and there was no end to those he told his secret to. Marty Agnew had somehow pinned a phony murder rap on Big Quin, twisted justice and had him hanged. He'd seen to it that the estate was settled in accordance with law and order, and he wound up with a legal bill of sale to Big Quin's strike that cost him a thousand dollars. Deducting certain court costs and fees, Jim O'Leary received a check for the balance. And now the mine was the biggest producer in that area. With that kind of money behind him, Agnew could hire the best guns in sight.

Young O'Leary licked his lips and evaluated the situation, quivering with the violence of his thoughts. His breath was flame-hot in his throat, and he had the violent urge to throw himself down into Nugget City and kill, kill, kill. . . .

Then his thoughts calmed and he jogged down hill at a vengeful stride.

Kerosene lamplight made strange yellow flares in the depth of the darkness. A wind shifting down the gulch lifted the musty odors toward him. From the jagged heights in the distance echoed the dull sounds of mining. There was the indolent drone of the stamp mills and the whir of steel cables and the grind of dry wheels on gritty tracks. Occasionally dynamite muttered from a shallow shaft.

"It's partly mine," O'Leary said between clenched teeth.

Miners were clumping out of the draws and down little paths toward the main street.

The new deputy threaded his way among them, entered the rear alleyway between two frame buildings. It was cluttered with broken bottles and crates and old papers. He stopped upon reaching the plank walk, and squinted guardedly out. He had hopes of intercepting Hap before the man found his way back into the saloon. But luck at this point seemed elusive.

All of a sudden O'Leary snorted happily. Half running along the walk came Hap, bruised and battered, face a twisted mask. O'Leary lurched from the narrow alleyway and collided with him.

Hap screamed out a curse and began slugging with both fists. He bent his bull neck and surged forward, digging his boot-toes into the dirt for traction.

O'Leary pivoted as a blow whacked his chin. He jerked back, smashing with his fists, and they landed where he wanted them to land, on the turn of Hap's jaw.

O'Leary slugged again, and he figured all the iron in the world must be in Hap's jaw. And while he was thinking of iron, a flying chunk of it seemed to skid along his chin.

Now they both rushed in, swinging viciously. Something with five lumpy knuckles kept battering at O'Leary's face. He kept jerking his chin first one way then the other, and finally gave up in disgust. The fist was always there. He almost wished Hap was his friend, because Hap was a man who hated defeat. Finally O'Leary sunk his fingers into a soft throat. A knee smashed his groin, ripping pain across his body. He dug in with his fingers, and when the knee smashed again it was with a weaker thrust, and O'Leary knew he was winning.

By now the battle was the center of amusement for several miners. They crowded around, cheering. Not for either of the fighters, but for the pleasure of seeing a good brawl. They all turned away in disgust when Hap finally caved in, and they began treking toward the nearest saloon.

O'Leary jerked the senseles Hap back into the dark passage between the buildings. He gulped in air to replenish his exhausted lungs, then tucked in his shirt tail, tossed Hap across one shoulder and clumped toward the jail.

"Oh-h!" McAuliffe groaned. "Ye've did it again! Ye're making a nervous wreck out of me, so ye are. Throw him in here with the other rat."

O'Leary sank back in a chair, dusting off his hand.

"Two out of thirteen, Pop," he chortled. "I never had so much fun in my life." He laughed as though he had not a care in the world, but inwardly, a bleak understanding as hard as an anvil was troubling him. He said, Y'know, Pop, I've started the ball rolling and it'll be an uphill push until we reach the top, then we can go fast. It won't be many minutes untill that gang of sidewinders get news of what's going on, and when they do they're gonna buzz their rattles to beat all hell."

NETTIE McAULIFFE strode through the doorway. She glared at O'Leary. She snapped, "You're fixin' to get Pa killed!"

"Shut up yer female trap!" McAuliffe growled. "Go home an' tend to yer knittin'. I was just tellin' O'Leary I was grateful he come along an' got the ball to rollin'!"

Nettie stamped her foot angrily. "You act like a pair of ninnies! You've taken on a twenty-man job and are crazy enough to believe you can finish it. I'm getting things packed Pa. I heard a couple of the boys rode off to fetch Marty Agnew. We better clear out!"

Old man McAuliffe snorted. "Hah! Clear out! Let 'em buzz their rattles! Who cares?" He turned to Jim O'Leary. "Ye think we oughta clear out, O'Leary?"

"With two mice already trapped and only eleven to go? Why, Pop—the fun don't start till we get to the rats."

"Go home, Nettie!" McAuliffe roared. "Females is allus gettin' in my hair."

"You big nincompoop!" she screamed at O'Leary. She flounced back outside.

"O'Leary ain't no ninnykapoop!" McAuliffe yelled after her. He sniffed and scratched his head. "Wimmin have horrible intuitions sometimes. . . ."

O'Leary sobered. "I'll have to admit that I'm getting you in up to your neck, Pop. But they taught me in school that when the irresistable force meets the immovable object there's liable to be hell to pay and the devil take the hindmost."

McAuliffe looked mystified. "Don't slap any of yere high-falutin' savvy at me, O'Leary. In the first place I don't like it. In the second place I don't savvy it. You think it's gonna work? That—that there irresponsible force stuff lockin' horns with the immaterial objeck?"

O'Leary shrugged. "Who knows?" he confessed. "It's never been tried.

O'LEARY began to ponder. He wondered how long his phenominal luck might last; for luck it was to a degree, he realized. He had made a successful surprise coup, but he knew he was not dealing with a gang of ragtail buttonheads. He was swinging a murderous catamount by its tail, and he had to maintain his hold or get ripped by the claws.

But he was uneasy about McAuliffe and his daughter, Nettie. To reach his own end, he had tossed them into a whirlpool of danger. He realized now that he had no right to do this. The girl was right. And for an instant he breathed deeply, thinking of Nettie. There was something about her that caused turmoil in him, the sort of turmoil he had never before experienced, and which he could not understand. And he suddenly knew that he was fighting for her, too.

He was striding along a dark path toward the main street, wondering what his next step should be. As thought in answer to his wondering, three squat figures shoved around a rock outcropping into his path, not fifteen feet away.

O'Leary apraised the figures swiftly, frowningly. In the starshine he saw the glint of gun steel. He hunched his big shoulder muscles. His gun butt was inches from his hand.

"We wanna palaver," one of the men said.

"Sure," O'Leary said levelly. "Go ahead."

"We're part of a secret citizen's committee. We figger yo're here to clean up a rat's nest, an' we wanna help."

O'Leary's lips thinned grimly, and he was tense with caution. "Who said I was here to clean up a rat's nest?" he asked.

The three heads went together for ten seconds. A mutter of curses reached O'Leary. Finally one of the men spoke up.

"Why'd yu' throw Whitey and Hap in the calabozo if yu' ain't here to clean up?"

"Coulda been just a persona grudge I had against them," O'Leary suggested lightly. He was cool and watchful.

"We think yo're a liar!" a voice snapped.

"Maybe I am," O'Leary said and ducked, smashing toward them.

Three flames licked toward O'Leary as he was dragging out his own gun. Something clubbed his left shoulder, spinning him backwards. His heel snagged on an anchored stone, flipping him on his back. The banshee screech of slugs yowled madly in his ears. Gravel stung his face as he clawed his way to one knee. Sickness burned his insides a moment. He yanked his trigger finger and flame spat against his eyeballs, dizzying his brain.

O'Leary emitted frantic curses through clenched teeth. Someone had a lever-action rifle going now. A heavy pair of shoulders rammed him head-on with a sickening thud. He fought free of strangling thick arms, clubbing with his gun. A knife blade flashed past his cheek and grated into the ground. He felt his knuckles grind into leathery flesh. O'Leary began to back-track, swinging right and left with his numbed left fist, using the pistol as a club because he had no time to aim at a target. The last thing

he remembered was thinking a silver-throated wildcat came screaming at his ears. . . .

Something that had the odor of starched linen and flowers filtered into his brain. His eyes opened vaguely and he was looking up at the prettiest moon he had ever seen. And it was the strangest moon, too, because it had a silver-throated voice.

"You're a nincompoop!" Nettie said.

His head was on her lap.

"Mm-m-m!" O'Leary murmured.

Suddenly Nettie leaped to her feet and O'Leary's head banged on a rock.

"Is that nice?" O'Leary groaned massaging a knot on the back of his head. He grinned weakly. "I thought you was packed to leave?"

"You had better get on your feet and take these mice to jail," Nettie snapped. "Besides, you've been shot in the shoulder. It needs dressing."

O'Leary waggled his laft arm experimentally. "Nothing serious," he said. "Just a nick."

McAULIFFE had taken heart and had a lantern burning on his pine-board desk. "It's agin my better will an' jedgement!" he'd groaned, then lit the lamp.

O'Leary came tramping through the doorway with one man hanging limply across a shoulder and a second one jouncing along behind, dragged by big hands O'Leary had in his collar.

McAuliffe threw up his hands in despair. "We're gonna have trouble, an' I c'n smell it plain as— Hey, y'big galoot! What's that there red stuff all over yer shoulder? Nettie! *Nettie!* Gimme a pan a water afore this flat-faced he-hellion busts down like a fiddle-gut! Net—"

"Coming, Pa," Nettie said. She was jabbing a short rifle into the back of a big, curly-headed man. Her braids were askew and splotches of blood made ragged patterns on her dress. Her cheeks were smeared with grit and her knuckles were skinned. But on her lips was a triumphant smile.

"My own daughter gettin' into a brawl side-by-side with a big Mick!" McAuliffe screeched half horrified. "Git in that there cell, ye skunk!" He helped Nettie's prisoner inside the cell with a kick. "No daughter of mine is gonna be a roughneck!" McAuliffe growled. "Ye've made a heller out of her, O'Leary! Nettie, go home an' tend to yer knittin'."

"Shut up, Pa! We got a fight on our hands."

McAuliffe wiped his forehead and eyes with a gnarled hand. "A—a fight, ye say! O'Leary, boy, are ye certain we ain't bit off more than— What do we do next? How many we got to go? Nettie, can't ye see the man's bleedin' like a stuck ninny-goat? Get some rags an' water."

As Nettie patched up his shoulder, O'Leary counted the men locked inside the big cell. "I guess we've gone far enough for the present," he said. He pulled a large silver watch from a pocket. "Nine o'clock it is. We'll have to sit a while for Mr. Agnew. Meanwhile, if we could get half a dozen men to man some guns, just in case."

McAuliffe was shaking his head, thoroughly mystified. "I got two, three cronies we could depend on. But what we gonna do, O'Leary?"

"We're going to wait for Agnew. We got the trap baited, and we got to wait for a nibble."

CHAPTER FIVE

. . . Like Rats in a Trap

TWO hours passed, during which O'Leary curled his big frame upon the floor of McAuliffe's office, napping fitfully. Sleepily he overhauled his plan searching for defects. He grinned to himself as he visualized some humor in the impending clash.

Meanwhile, McAuliffe plodded through the darkness to round up four men, men he knew he could trust even if it came to death. They were old, like himself, tarred with the same brush and galled with the bitterness of living under renegade law. Abe Halloway, who operated a small grocery store, was a tall, hawk-faced old fellow with a rasping voice and faded blue eyes but a youthful spring in his legs. Nels Breedlove was pretty fleshy for fast action, but planted in one spot he could well account for himself with a gun. Nels owned a small dry-goods store next to Abe's grocery, and his usually twinkling eyes were hard as he thought of escaping from the devil's bondage he lived under. The other pair, in their late fifties, were Bart and Henry Tilcomb, brothers. They were hard men, these Tilcombs, born and bred in the gold fields. Bart and Henry, like Big Quin O'Leary, had made a good strike up the canyon and had been fleeced out of it by Agnew's shyster lawyer and hired guns. They had their bone to chaw with the renegade pack, and had waited impatiently for the time to come home when they could scuttle the bullies of Nugget City.

Finally O'Leary quit snoring and clambered to his feet, stretching and yawning. "How're our mice?" he asked McAuliffe.

"SKULKY," McAuliffe said. "Been cussin" like crazy men, an' tellin' how Marty Agnew'll string us up like so many coyotes. Sez when Agnew arrives he'll get his gang together an' bust open this here jail like it was a cracker box." He scowled with deep concern. "Mebbe we c'n hold 'em off. Six of us."

O'Leary grinned. He walked over to the end of the office where several rifles were standing in a wall rack. "Got plenty of ammunition for these guns?" he asked McAuliffe.

"Got a new case in the corner closet," McAuliffe said.

"Good!" Jim O'Leary commented dryly. He stepped over and brought the case out and opened it. He pulled out several boxes of cartridges and stacked them on McAuliffe's desk. And then the sounds of loping horses came bluntly across a distant crest. All heads jerked round.

"They're comin'," McAuliffe whispered.

O'Leary bounced across the room and extinguished the lantern. "Now, here's what we do," he said softly. "McAuliffe, take your four men and plant them upslope, scattered out so they command a view of this building. You stay with them."

"Wait a minnit!" McAuliffe said, his whiskers quavering on his cheeks. "We ain't leavin' ye here, boy, to do all the dirty work."

"Y'want me to go into that mathmatical formula again? O'Leary asked.

McAuliffe snorted angrily. "Ye're a loco idjut, son. Mebbe ye know what ye're doin', mebbe not. All right. C'mon, men. We do as this young Mick idjut says." He glanced half mournfuly toward O'Leary. "In case I don't see ye again, goodbye."

"Beat it, Pop!" O'Leary said laughingly. "An' don't shoot me if I lope out of here right sudden like."

McAuliffe departed, shaking his head moodily, certain that he'd seen O'Leary alive for the last time. When the men were gone, O'Leary stood a few feet back from the open doorway, immersed in shadow. Minutes ticked by, and he became nervous and stalked silently around inside the office, running his finger idly across the rack of rifles. A half hour passed, and he began to worry.

Back in a corner of the office he struck a match, cupped the flare in one hand, and looked at his watch. Ten minutes to midnight. Agnew had been back for an hour. Why hadn't the renegade struck? For a moment O'Leary's confidence was shaken.

If the plan backfired, he thought, may the Good Lord have mercy on. . . . Suddenly a shock burst into his thoughts. In two soft leaps he was at the doorway, hat off, sweeping the area toward town with his eyes. A low moon cast freakish light into the gulch. O'Leary spotted a bobbing dark patch of men.

He snatched down five rifles and held them in the crook of one thick arm. He moved swiftly to the table and loaded the other arm with boxes of ammunition.

"Gillette!" he called softly.

A SNARL and the thump of bootheels on concrete greeted him.

O'Leary's head was canted anxiously to one side, listening for sounds from outside. "It's something I never figured on, Gillette!" he said huskily. "I figured to bring in a district judge and have you men tried. But the citizens have heard we have you locked up. They've formed a vigilante committee and they're on their way here to lynch you men!" The room was suddenly filled with bestial cries of anger and muffled curses. "There's only one thing I can do to right the wrong I've done you," O'Leary hastened to explain. "I'm giving you guns to defend your lives."

"Hurry up!" a cracked voice moaned fearfully. "I hear them coming now!"

"I'm leaving each of you a rifle and plenty shells. I haven't got a key, or I'd let you out so you could run for it. It's the best I can do until I can get help. You'll have to fight them off!" He shoved rifles through the bars and tossed boxes of cartridges after them.

Whirling back into the office, he pulled his six-gun and dropped to all fours and crawled outside. He lay in the shadows, waiting. Now he could see the group approaching. There were at least a dozen, he thought. He saw them begin to fan out. He lifted his revolver and emptied it in their direction. "That'll start the ball rolling," he muttered, and ran upslope.

The answering blast to O'Leary's shots came in a deafening roar and slugs began smashing into the jail building. By the time O'Leary was a hundred feet away a second volley exploded, and he turned in time to see flame pitting the jail windows. A spread pattern of rifle fire came from the darkness as Marty Agnew deployed his gang strategically. Through the wild confusion and chaos men cursed madly, others screeched in mortal agony. O'Leary thought there had never been so many expert guns pitted against each other in Nugget City's history.

O'Leary cupped his hands and began calling McAuliffe's name. Presently he got a hollow-voiced reply.

"O'Leary, boy! By crickety-hell, how'd ye escape from that inferno. Sounds like the end of a rabbit drive." He stood up out of the brush and walked forward.

"O'Leary was laughing softly. "Why, Pop, that's the irresistable force ramming into the immovable object!"

McAuliffe snorted in disgust. "I don't give a whing-doodle what ye call it, O'Leary! I want an explanation!"

THE battle below them roared to a flaming pitch, whipping first one way and then the other like the lashing tail of a tornado.

McAuliffe glared up at O'Leary, and the youth grinned down at the old man.

"I figured if we got about half that gang in jail, the other half would try to free them. Agnew attacked the jail thinking we were in there to defend it. I told Gillette and the others that a vigilante committee had been formed by angry citizens, and they were on their way up to lynch them. I gave them rifles to defend themselves. But our job isn't finished, McAuliffe! Sooner or later Agnew will storm the jail. The minute he does, if there's anyone left alive inside, the cat's out of the bag."

McAuliffe nodded understandingly. "Yeh—quick like a skittle-bug they'll know they been flam-boozled."

"So call in your men, and the minute Agnew storms the jail we come in behind them shooting."

McAuliffe jiggled in his excitement and called in the men to explain the plan. The battle raged below for thirty minutes, giving them ample time to maneuver down the incline and take up positions behind Agnew's crew. And when O'Leary saw a man leap to his feet screaming and lead the charge on the jail, he started pumping lead and roaring for McAuliffe and the others to do battle.

They had them cornered like so many rats. Three inside the cell block were dead from Agnew's guns, and five of the men Agnew brought in to the attack were dead. McAuliffe and O'Leary and their four grim comrades literally blasted the remaining renegades with gunfire.

When it was finally quiet and they were walking down through the excited crowd of citizens to have a drink at the nearest saloon, McAuliffe was still muttering in his whiskers, "Lemme see now—irremovable—er—umph! T'hell with it. It worked!"

* * *

"Nettie!" McAuliffe screamed as he walked through the front door of his house. "Net—"

"Here in the kitchen, Pa," she called.

McAuliffe scowled. "If ye was worth two cents, there'd be coffee ready."

"It's ready, Pa."

McAuliffe scowled and worked his whiskers. "Exactly like a woman, O'Leary. Ye can't never depend on them."

O'Leary grinned him down. Nettie came in carrying two large mugs of steaming coffee.

O'Leary met her eyes, and when he realized she might have winked ever so slightly, something flopped over in him.

McAuliffe was scowling into his cup. Suddenly his eyes lit up. "Nettie!" he yelled, "where in aitch is our guest gonna sleep!"

"The extra bed is all fixed, Pa."

McAuliffe exploded a mild curse into his cup. "Never trust a woman, O'Leary; they'll cross ye ever time."

O'Leary didn't care.

THE END

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He reared up and drove his arm forward.

LAST TRIP TO HANGTOWN

By CALVIN L. BOSWELL

In the last, agonized moments of his hunted life, Tom Dineen learned that there was just one, sure-fire thing that might free a man from his shadow—Dynamite!

HE FOLLOWED the dim trail slowly, a gaunt and haggard man, pausing now and then to look backward through the thick-standing pines. It had been a constant thing, this looking over his shoulder, so that now it had become a part of him—like feeling and breathing. Still, it shamed him.

He trudged through a hollow, angled toward a clear, swift creek, and memory touched him, driving him forward with increasing haste. He reached the creek and then was plunging through it, hardly feeling its icy shock, and breaking into a

shambling run up the opposite bank with the water sludging in his shoes.

The trail curved, following the creek's ribboning course; he pounded along it, his black-stubbled face now eager and alight with a rushing uptide of expectation. Quite suddenly he reached a break in the trees and came to a ragged-breathing halt, letting his gaze run over this once familiar scene.

He saw the mounds of gravel, first, down on the flat by the creek edge. Then he saw the rocker, like a grotesque animal of iron and wood in the strong sunlight; and beside it, stretching for two thirds of the distance up the bare hillface, the flume of split logs that he had built so long ago to convey the gold-bearing gravel from the mine above.

All this he covered in a sweeping glance, and then lengthened his gaze, bringing it to rest upon the log cabin perched on a flat cutbank against the trees beyond. He wondered why no smoke plumed up from the chimney, and felt his exaltation slowly turn gray and cold. He thought: *She has given me up for dead; she has sold out and gone.*

Almost unconsciously he turned and glanced along the trail behind him; then he moved forward, stepping obliquely across the slope to the rocker. Here he stopped, noting with a quick return of interest the signs of recent labor. Suddenly he heard a glad shout from above and he spun around in his tracks. A small figure erupted from the mine entrance and came flying down the hill in a great cloud of dust and rubble, laughing and crying all in the same breath.

He took a step toward her; he held out his arms and then she was in them, fiercely clutching him and burying her face in his shoulder.

"Oh, Tom!" she said brokenly. "Tom, dearest. . . ."

"There, now," he murmured. He held her away from him, hungrily drinking in the brimming blue eyes and the small stubborn mouth and the row of freckles marching across the bridge of her uptilted nose.

"Your face is dirty, Mrs. Dineen," he said gravely. "You've been working the mine, haven't you?"

"Yes. . . . Oh, darling, what happened? What did they do to you?"

His smile died. "It's a long story. . . . First let me clean up and get out of these clothes."

SHE HEATED water on the stove and he stripped to the waist and filled the tin basin just outside the cabin door. She watched him silently while he washed and shaved, her eyes grown dark by the way his ribs and shoulder bones stood out. Afterwards, when she had trimmed his lank hair and he was dressed once more in his miner's boots and pants and double-breasted shirt, he said: "For a while I thought you had gone to your people in Vermont."

"Not as long as I had hope. After you disappeared I waited in the hotel until the police said they could do no more, and then I came back here."

He shook his head slowly. "Our trip to San Francisco was dearly bought."

"But what happened? Why didn't you come back?"

"I was doped and shanghaied," he said. "I went down to the Metropolitan for theater tickets for that night, and on the way back to the hotel I stopped in a saloon for a drink. That's the last I knew of anything until I came to on a four-master bound for the Indies."

"Was it—bad?"

"It was a hell-ship. Brutal officers and a wild crew and rotten food. We lost two men on the trip over and another coming back."

"When did you get in port?" she asked.

"Three weeks ago. But that wasn't the

last of it. The officers wouldn't let us ashore; crews of any kind are almost impossible to get, and they were keeping us aboard for another voyage. They had a bucko mate by the name of Bromley. I knocked him overboard one night and then dove off the side." He opened his right hand, palm down, and slowly turned it over and stared at it. "He couldn't swim; he drowned."

"He deserved it!" she said fiercely. "They had no right to hold you!"

"Perhaps. But the third officer was his brother, and he has been on my trail ever since." He raised his head, looking full into her eyes. "He'll kill me if he gets the chance, Martha."

"He won't find you," she said, and her voice was a prayer. "These Sierras are big. And the mountain people won't talk."

He shrugged. "Some men always have a price. That's why I came roundabout through the back country instead of striking directly up by way of Hangtown. I had a brush with him in Sacramento; I think I lost him, but I'm not sure."

She got up, crossed the room and reached into a can on the shelf above the stove. She came back and laid a fat, full buckskin poke on the table in front of him.

"We have this," she murmured. "We could go back to Vermont."

He hefted it, feeling the weight of the gold, and he thought for a moment, then said stubbornly: "No. This is our home. If he finds me here I'll see it through. I won't run any farther."

DINEEN found that the old way of life came readily back to him. He was up at dawn, listening to the mountains come awake and smelling the clean-sharp odors of coffee and bacon and flapjacks. After breakfast he smoked his pipeful of tobacco while the bed was made and the dishes cleaned, and then he clambered up the slope to the mine.

Its tunnel bored straight into the heart of the mountain off a narrow ledge, following the alluvial gravel of an ancient creek bed that was sandwiched in between granite bedrock and a layer of sandstone. He worked at this with his pick, chopping the stuff away and shoveling it into a wheelbarrow and then moving it out to the ledge and spilling it into the wooden flume that carried it down to the creekside, to be later run through the rocker.

At first he often thought of the ship; of the wet, windswept days and nights he'd spent on its heaving deck; and of the viciousness of the motley crew. He thought of Bromley, then found himself glancing across the stream, half expecting to see the thickset, bullfrog figure of the man come swaggering out of the pines.

With the passing days the picture grew dim, but it was always in the back of his mind. It was in the hours of hard labor, and the twilights spent sitting outside the cabin. It was in Martha's eyes and in the way she jerked around at any unexpected noise. . . .

Over supper one evening he said, "I've run into a nest of big rocks in the drift face and I can't cut in any deeper until I break them up and get them out of the way. We need dynamite; there's only one stick up at the mine."

She stopped a forkful of food halfway to her lips and he saw the quick alarm touch her face.

"That means a trip to Hangtown," she said.

"Yes."

"I'll go. There are somethings I want, too. Some dress material. My clothes are turning to rags."

"It's Bromley," he said. "You're still worried about him."

"Of course. A man like that never gives up. He may be in Hangtown. Or he may eventually come there and someone might tell him they saw you. Then what?"

"Then I'd have to meet him."

"You won't meet him!" she exclaimed passionately. "I won't take that chance! I'm perfectly capable of traveling alone over these mountains; I did it while you were gone. Besides, I'd like to see Elizabeth Mulvaney. It's been a long time."

He remembered Elizabeth. She and Martha had been school chums back in Vermont. He shrugged and spread his palms, knowing the wisdom of his wife's argument.

"Very well, if that is your wish," he agreed. "Maybe you ought to spend two or three days with the Mulvaneys while you're down there. I guess a woman gets lonesome for her kind in these hills."

SHE LEFT early the next morning, bright eyed with her expectation of seeing Elizabeth again. He stood in the middle of the trail and watched her until she disappeared among the trees, her small figure upright in the saddle of the big bay she was riding.

Afterwards he went down to the rocker, noting the size of the pile of unwashed gravel that had accumulated at the foot of the wooden flume. He picked up a shovel, dug it into the gravel and emptied it into the square metal pan on the top of the rocker. He drew water from the stream, threw it into the pan and began to move it back and forth watching the fine, loose stuff wash down through the perforations onto the slanted apron and thence to the riffles below.

An hour went by and then two. He worked steadily, pausing now and then to remove his hat and wipe the beading sweat off his forehead. The day grew steadily hotter. On one of his trips to the stream he set the empty bucket down and dropped full length upon the bank, lowering his face for a drink. Here the water was quiet, forming a smooth eddy that reflected his head and shoulders as though in a dark mirror. He could even see the upside-down blue sky and the ragged line of the opposite mountain. In the near foreground, standing just over the stream, he could see the stocky, black-clothed figure of Third Mate Bromley, peering along the sights of a rifle. . . .

He dodged galvanically the instant the gun exploded; got his legs under him and took a full, turning leap toward a small boulder lying off the end of the rocker. He hit behind it on all fours, scrubbing his knees and his hands on the sharp gravel, and at once pulled his legs up toward his belly, hunching down behind the rock's scant protection.

He crouched rigidly motionless, wondering why a second shot had not followed the first. The fleeting seconds piled their steady-growing weight against him and he began to sweat gently between the shoulder blades. He could almost see the man slyly, soundlessly approaching the rock, intent on making sure that his second bullet wouldn't miss.

Tortured by the thought, he risked a rapid glance around its lower edge. Bromley was still across the stream with the rifle over his arm, jerking savagely at a jammed cartridge. Relief ran through Dineen, then was immediately gone. He realized that the man might free the gun at any instant and this inadequate bulwark would at once become untenable.

For a moment he considered the idea of charging Bromley head on, and as swiftly rejected it because of the depth of the stream here, which would slow him—make the move sheer suicide. With growing desperation he looked around him. His rifle was in the cabin, a hundred yards over open ground. The forest, in the other direction was the same distance away.

There was a large, blunted tooth of rotten granite jutting out from the hillface ten yards behind him; but even this was poor cover. The mine tunnel twenty feet above that rock was his only safe retreat. . . .

He came abruptly to his feet, hearing Bromley bellow as he plunged up the hill in a bucking scramble. He gained the granite tooth and flung himself around it; he looked back and saw Bromley hip-deep in the middle of the stream and striding forward with his round, bullish face upturned, his hands still wrestling with the jammed rifle.

Dineen glanced toward the tunnel, measuring that last steep twenty feet, knowing that his time would run out at any second.

HE CAME away from the outthrust rock, digging his toes into the hill's side hard, throwing himself upward and kicking loose a dusty mass of rubble that slithered away behind him. He touched the narrow ledge facing the tunnel and heard the rifle's sharp report, felt the bullet tug at his shirt. With one last wild heave he was up and over, rolling into the tunnel as two more quick-spaced shots slapped into the sandstone roof above him, bringing down their gritty rain.

He lay there pulling deeply for breath. A metallic racket came up from below and he wriggled out on the edge of the granite shelf and peered over its edge. Bromley was literally going crazy. He had pulled the rocker on its side and now was kicking the bottom out of the water bucket. As Dineen watched he swung about and lined his rifle on the cabin, laying a scatter of shots through the windows and door.

Dineen jerked back as the frenzied third mate fired his last bullets at the mine opening, and when he looked again Bromley had reloaded and was staring upward in a quivering, voiceless rage. He wouldn't come after him; Dineen knew that. Only a fool would venture into the black shaft of a tunnel after a man, and no fool could have doggedly hunted him down through all these mountains.

He became aware of a scuttling against the face of the hill; he heard the tumbling rattle of small stones and backed into the tunnel's heavy darkness, listening sharply. Bromley raised his voice, harsh and heavy: "You in there! Do you hear me!"

"I hear you," said Dineen.

"Let me tell you this, friend. I'll wait here until hell is full of ice, if necessary, so you might as well come out now and take it clean."

In his mind Dineen pictured the man lying on his belly with his rifle pointing over the edge of that granite tooth, watching for him to thrust his head beyond the shelf. He remained silent and Bromley spoke again: "I've got you cooped up in a dry hole, mister. If you don't come out now you'll eventually go crazy looking at all that water below, and I'll get you anyway. Why torture yourself?"

Dineen swallowed, aware for the first time of the fuzziness in his mouth and throat. Bromley had touched the truth closer than he knew.

"Listen," he said urgently. "I was taken aboard your ship and held on it against my will. I didn't kill your brother; he drowned after I knocked him overboard. You would have done the same if you were in my place."

Bromley's answer was a bullet that slapped into the tunnel and went whining away into its depths.

The sun had climbed steadily; now it was spreading its full heat against the bare face of the hill and beginning to creep into the mine opening. Dineen's growing thirst prompted him to pick up a pebble and put it in his mouth. It tasted acrid and immediately soaked up what little saliva he had left, and he spat it out.

He frowned and shook his head, summoning all of his thoughts against this problem. He realized now that the mine's protection had become a trap. He couldn't hold out indefinitely, and getting away would be impossible even at night. There wasn't a beggar's chance of clouds at this

season, and although the moon was a mere sliver, the star-shine was bright enough to make him a perfect target. Then, too, there was Martha. Even if he could last until she returned he'd still be trapped, because Bromley would grab her and he'd give himself up rather than see her harmed.

HE SCRUBBED his hand across his jaw, wondering how this would end. His glance fell upon a box lying within a niche in the opposite wall, bearing the single word "Dynamite" in square black letters along its side. It stirred a quick thought and he stepped forward and reached inside it, bringing forth the single stick it contained. He crimped a short length of fuse in a detonating cap and inserted this in its end. The flick of a match and a quick throw would blast out of existence that granite outcropping behind which Bromley lay, and him with it.

He dropped to his knees and then went full length, wriggling like an Indian until he came out into the hot sunlight on the ledge. He reached into his shirt pocket; he dipped into all of his pockets one after the other; and then he lay there bitterly, silently cursing. His matches had been in his shirt; he remembered that clearly. He must have lost them in his first wild leap.

An hour passed and then another, and Dineen's thirst steadily increased. He listened dully to Bromley's yells and taunts and wondered how great a man's desire for revenge must be to make him lie in that rock's scant shade and take the heat's continuous, brutal punishment.

He heard a slithering of loose stones and came to the mouth of the tunnel and peered over to see Bromley going down the hill in great sliding steps. While he looked on, the man walked out to the creek, dropped his gun beside him and went face down, putting his lips against the water and drinking deliberately.

Dineen was sure that it was a trick to draw him into the open, and yet it offered a chance to get clear. The narrow ledge which fronted the mine ran horizontally for thirty feet or so and then petered out into the bare face of the hill. Another ten yards beyond was the hill's down-running lip, with its heavy growth of brush and trees. If he could make this cover he'd be safe.

He came fully out of the tunnel and be-

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gan moving rapidly along the ledge. He had scarcely gone twenty feet when Bromley sprang upright and whipped around, snatching his rifle. Dineen felt the wind of the first shot and ducked, and ran on. The second bullet cut a searing burn along his flank and he knew dismally that he could never make it. He went down in a spinning fall and scrambled back for the tunnel entrance, hugging the ledge while Bromley's following shots hammered into the hill around him.

He made the opening and tumbled inside with his heart drumming, his breath clogging his throat. The exertion had aggravated his thirst, making it almost intolerable. He swallowed convulsively and rolled his tongue around in his mouth. He heared Bromley's churning progress up the hill and then his voice, soft and dead-sure: "Pretty close, my friend. The next time I'll peg you."

The ruthless certainty in his tone beat against Dineen's mind. He turned and came slowly to his knees, and his bleak, hopeless glance fell upon the stick of dynamite, still lying in the sun's full heat where he had dropped it. Out of habit he reached forth to bring it within the tunnel's shade, aware of the explosive's latent danger when it became hot.

Suddenly all his thoughts centered on this fact. He knew that the stuff grew increasingly unstable as it became hotter, and that in this condition shock alone could set it off.

He thought of the granite tooth on the slope below, and of Bromley lying behind it. If he could throw it hard enough and straight enough. . . .

HE PICKED the dynamite up and gently rubbed it with his thumb, feeling its warmth and the greasiness of the nitroglycerin sweating through the paper jacket. He inched out upon the ledge and paused there, touched with a sudden doubt. He'd have to take Bromley's first bullet, because there was no other way. If the man's shot stopped him or if he missed. . . .

He set himself, gathering all his strength; he drew a slow, deep breath and got his left hand under him. With a quick thrust he pushed himself forward.

He saw the quick surprise on Bromley's face. He saw the swing of the rifle's round barrel and its bright muzzle-blast. He heard the sharp report and tried to dodge and felt the bullet's hard shock as it slammed into his shoulder. The force of it half lifted him and flung him on his side.

He rolled over as Bromley jacked another shell into the gun. He held his mind still against the pain, pulling his lips tight against his teeth as he reared up and drove his arm forward. . . .

For an instant the world stood still. Dineen was briefly aware of Bromley's shout and of the dynamite flying end over end, straight for the granite outcropping. A racketing explosion blossomed into the air shaking Dineen roughly and spewing up a mass of stones and dust.

The bellow of sound echoed away into the mountains and came back upon him in widening ripples of sound. The stench of burned explosive was strong in his nostrils as he peered over and saw the shattered stub of what had been the granite tooth. Half down the slope and all but buried by chunks of rock and rubble, he could see a still, dark-clad figure, like a shadow against the gray face of the hill.

Dineen lifted his head, wincing at the pain of his wounded shoulder. Like a shadow . . . that was it. The threat of this man's vengeance had been a shadow darkly touching the lives of Martha and himself, and now it was forever gone and they were free. . . .

He came slowly down off the ledge thinking eagerly of Martha's return.

FREEDOM CALL OF THE UNTAMED

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Maka came snarling from the den.

The trapper stared longingly at the sun-bear's golden pelt, vowed it would be his. But Dan Lee didn't know that in Hak's savage heart there pounded an urge for freedom that was as fierce and untamed as his own!

THE spring thaw came early in the deeps of the Swan River hinterland. The old black she-bear blinked her eyes and snarled softly as she emerged from her den. Seeing scarcely farther than the area surrounding her den, Maka was conscious of the fact that many signs of winter were still left. The snow was deep in the gulleys; deep at the timber belts and sere tamarac swamps.

She lifted her paws, flicking them to rid them of thawed slush. She cocked her head as she sat back, listening vainly for the welcome calls of Niska, the Canada gander, and his honking flight. But there were no such sounds. Instead, Maka started every now and then as she caught the high, shrill cries of the starving timber wolves. Maka shuddered. The black and gray marauders could be a grave menace to her twin cubs now coiled in the deeps of the den.

She dropped to all fours and moved on into a willow thicket, sniffing sharply, hoping to catch the tang of some inviting vegetation. But the snow was still deep. Raising her head, she nipped at a cluster of dogwood berries which still clung to the shrub. She chewed a moment, the bitter taste bringing a growl from her cavernous throat. This was not food, but a form of medicine she needed.

She moved on, out into the sunlight, whimpered with pleasure as a warm chi-

nook wind ruffled her fur. But suddenly she whirled, rearing to her full height, for on that wind there came the sharp tang of a man. Almost too late, Maka whipped about and lunged to the cover as a rifle shot blasted. She felt a sharp sting on the skin on her back and tottered a moment before recovering and scrambling into the depths of the thicket.

Maka did not return to her den until she was sure that she had completely hidden her trail, by leaping from one wind-blown ledge to another. She circled, struck the timber, and moved along the south slopes of ridges already bare of snow.

Now, in the haven of a wild fruit thicket, she rolled into a snow drift, lay on her side until the bleeding of her wound was staunched. Then she rose and swayed back to the den. . . .

Maka had been in her long sleep while Dan Lee, the trapper, carried out his winter's work in the Swan Hills country. He had been too preoccupied with his traplines to bother about hunting bear dens. But now his major trapping was done for the season, and there was left only some muskrat trapping at the small lakes, and some mink trapping along the creeks.

Lee knew this was good sun, or cinnamon bear country, and he wanted a few good hides for rugs for his folk in the city. Maka was a black bear, but Lee could not resist the urge to shoot, to kill her, for he hated all bears. In the autumn they had repeatedly pilfered his caches of food, and once his entire main cache of winter's food had been ruined.

Although Lee knew he had only lightly wounded the she-bear, he smiled grimly, in the realization that she would respect his sign more from now on. He promised himself that if he had the time, before the plane came in to take him and his fur bales back to the settlement, he would hunt around for that old black's den in the hope of destroying the cubs before they grew up to menace and pilfer his food stocks.

Lee's traplines ran many miles, and at various points he established food caches between his line cabins. There was always the chance that a sharp blizzard might hole him up for two or three days at a time, and those caches could mean the difference between life and death. Still smiling, Lee turned away from the bear trail. He had some mink sets to examine.

BACK at the den, Maka weaved around, with foam flicking from her champing jaws. She struck savagely at a rotted windfall, sending frozen punk scattering in all directions, as her bitterness and anger mounted. Then she turned and stole into the den, gathered her ludicrously small cubs into her forearms.

She licked each one with her tongue and murmured softly in throaty sounds that completely belied her mood of savagery of a few moments ago.

As the day dragged on toward evening, she pricked her ears forward, listening to the drip of water from the rock shelves and foliage behind the den.

Soon, as the thaw intensified she would hear the music of the nearby creek. She would *woof* with pleasure at the pipings and quackings of pintail and teal ducks, and in the soft nights she would watch the starlit sky, where Niska and his honking flocks flew northward to their nesting grounds and waters.

Maka slept, and danger lurked outside. Lean-bellied, strong-fanged wolves had picked up her blood trail, followed it to her den. There, immediately outside the den, they sat to wait. Their terrible yellow-green eyes glared, and long tongues laved slavering chops in the hope that the great black one had been mortally wounded.

With the coming of the dawn, however, Maka came snarling from the den and scattered the three loboes, her huge tusks bared as she sent the would-be killers bounding to safety. Still snarling, she

whipped herself into a terrific fury, and not until she had torn and battered a willow clump with her fangs and paws, did she return to the den entrance. Muffled growls continued to pour from her throat as she weaved restlessly back and forth.

The spring season came with its cataracting floods, and Maka grunted contentedly as she moved about the meadow bottom-land, grubbing for skunk cabbage roots. She chortled gleefully when she reached the riffles of the creek and plunged in to snap at leaping grayling or pike in their spring spawning run. Now and then she was successful and waded dripping to the flat bank to enjoy the season's first feast of fish.

Later, when the warmth of the sun had penetrated the frozen, rotten logs, she broke them open with battering forepaw strokes and lapped at the ants and other insects. Whenever a shifting wind brought her the dread tang of the man, she whirled into cover, then streaked back to her den.

Rabbits had their young, grouse hens set their eggs, and Maka was relieved of a threat of attack by the starving wolves.

At last she brought her two cubs into the sunlight—the one a small black female; the other a large, beautiful cinnamon, or sun-bear male, a strong promising youngster, whose soft coat glowed like spun gold in the sunlight.

Maka sat back and watched her cubs at their play. They reared and boxed, tumbled and rolled. Always it was the sun-bear, Hak, that won the bouts. It was he who influenced his sister to follow him on his first excursion—a stealthy creep into the fringe of the nearest thicket. It was he who suddenly whirled, squealing, when sharply bitten by a field mouse. Tumbling, scrambling, rolling, the cubs scuttled back to the protecting forearms of their mother, and Maka laved the tiny pinprick punctures in little Hak's muzzle, murmuring soft growls of reassurance.

Thus the education of Hak began. It was not long before he was snarling in his immature voice as beneath his paw lay crushed a tiny creature, a hairless little field mouse. It was his first conquest.

MAKA took her young farther afield as the spring matured into early summer. Today she lay in the cool sedges of a slough lake, a small isolated lake completely shut in by a fringe of willows and alders and backed by the dense jungle of tamaracs and spruces. Here, Maka grunted contentedly as she blinked into the play of sunlight on the gently rippling lake's surface.

Hak enjoyed the water. He rolled in it, now and then starting up a boisterous game with his sister. Maka was suddenly called into swift rescue action when Hak, the heavier of the twins, had gotten his sister down under a paw. She was threshing madly in an effort to save herself from drowning. A sharp blow from Maka's paw sent Hak toppling clear, splashing into deep water. For a moment or so he was panic-stricken, until his forepaws began to work and pull him along. He discovered his ability to swim, and he weaved his head from side to side as he struck out for the deeper water. Snarling, Maka lunged ahead and soon had turned him, heading him back to the sedges where she chastised him with a few cuffs and a savage snarling reprimand.

He cringed back to drier land at the meadow edge and shook the water from his fur. He smashed at a grass hummock with a forepaw and turned to snarl in the direction of his mother and sister. He had sharply felt a desire for adventure, a natural desire in one so vigorous, and he had been thwarted. He was angry now. Maka's responsibilities increased as her young developed.

A few days later, taking a nap in the cool recess of an overhang of rock near the den, Maka was startled by frantic squeals coming from the thicket. Like a

dark blur she plunged into the thicket, found Hak rolling in pain, his muzzle decorated by porcupine quills. First, in her fury, she flicked the old porky onto his back and killed him, then she swung and placed a heavy paw on little Hak's shoulder, pining him down, while she carefully extracted the quills. Soon she was half-dragging, half-propelling Hak on to the mucky shore of a small spring where she thrust his muzzle into the cooling, healing muck and water despite his squealed protests. . . .

Her cubs at last weaned, Maka took them on to the creek shallows, though the fish had finished their spawning run. Every now and then her great jaws struck with lightning speed, to strike at local grayling. The cubs awkwardly endeavored to emulate her actions. Day after day Maka continued her lessons in fishing.

In the woods and scrub brush she taught Hak and his sister to identify the different kinds of fruit, at times deliberately urging them to nip off clusters of harmful berries—bitter to the taste. Maka's method of schooling her young was both patient, careful and sharp. At last she took them to the wide blueberry patches in the jackpine country. Here, they were challenged by other bears. Here little Hak got into trouble as he challenged and got into difficulties with cubs his own size and pugnacity. More than once his belligerence precipitated fights between Maka and the other mothers who roared into battle, flailing, clawing lunging and biting.

Maka was larger, wiser than the others and she came out of each fray triumphant, albeit now and then battle-scarred.

BEFORE the first frosts struck the hinterland, Maka hustled her handsome well-grown cubs on to more vigorous foraging. From now on, until the snow flew, they must thicken the tallow under their hides against the coming of their long sleep. But Hak, lacking his mother's intelligence, ran off most of his day's accumulation of fat. He took plenty of cuffings from Maka whose patience was becoming exhausted. Now and then he snapped back at her, or reared to snarl and strike at her. But Maka was swift. She knew how to rock him off his feet with a blow which, while sending him into an ignominious tumble down a slope, caused him no serious hurt. His repeated chastisement brought mounting bitterness to Hak's brain. While his mother slept, he whimpered softly to his sister. He nudged her to all fours and lured her out of the den, to go stealing through the dry, rustling grass. In the clear, at last, he broke into a shambling lope without looking back.

Hak came to a halt, blowing hard at the creek. He waded out to rest in the shallows, but when a fish leaped he whirled and flapped awkwardly in an attempt to snaps his jaws on the elusive silvery back, as his mother had so often done.

His temper soured, he turned to smack at his cringing sister, toppling her back into deep water. In a panic, she turned and swam back to shore. Hak moved on to the farther bank and stood there, calling, then snarling, as he watched his twin, rump down, go streaking back toward the lair.

Hak was alone. He weaved, swaggering up to a green poplar tree bole. He rose to his hind legs and stretched his foreclaws as high up the bole as he could. He sank his teeth and claws into the bark, making his puny marks far below the old claw and teeth scars of adult bears, which he vainly tried to reach. When a red squirrel chirred mockingly, Hak whirled and gave chase. He threshed about the underbrush, hunting for the fleet-footed mocker.

By nightfall Hak was far from his den. He crept timorously into a thicket of awe-inspiring tamaracs, cringing as he heard the muffled drumming of thunder. Hak

whined and cowered as almost directly above him there sounded the deathly calls of Ah-Hoo, the great horned owl. Tired, he sagged to rest, but could not sleep. The drumbeat of thunder became louder and he blinked in fear at the occasional stabbing flashes of lightning shafting through the timber. The weather had of late grown increasingly hotter, freakish weather for the time of the year.

Suddenly a blinding flash of lightning brought Hak to all fours, then up on to his hind legs. The attendant crash of thunder had terrified him thoroughly.

But, as mysteriously as it had come, the storm showed immediate signs of receding. The lightning, fork and sheet, was not as sharp, but that one blinding flash had done its grim work. Hak's nostrils felt the dread tang of acrid smoke.

HAK whimpered. He turned to sniff at his back trail. Wind stirred sharply in the thicket. From a distant point there came the long penetrating call of a black wolf—a shrill cry of warning that told him devils were rampant on the range.

He jumped as he heard the crackle of flame. He lunged forward but a whorling wind sent burning grass ahead, trapping him. He whipped about and in his panic clambered up a tree in whose fork he clung desperately, blinking into the building holocaust which now roared across a tinder-dry meadow. Flames leaped and flicked the topmost fronds of the tree Hak had climbed. A spark dropped on his back. He squealed when a small ember struck his muzzle, and he went toppling to the ground. A small creature flashed by, a creature which gave off the strong scent of fear. Like a flash, Hak followed in the trail of the frightened one—a young mule-deer doe.

The little bear whinned as he loped. Fortunately, the strong fear scent of the doe gave Hak direction. He was able to follow, but suddenly he rocked back on his haunches as a clump of bone-dry alders, like a fiery torch, crashed across the path of the doe, ahead. She hesitated a moment or so, blowing hard, then suddenly she sprang, leaping high over the flaming mass to the clearway ahead. In sheer desperation, Hak was forced to follow. There was no other course, no other avenue of escape.

He bunched himself and sprang, but his bound was not high enough to clear a tongue of flame which lapped at his underparts. He dropped, rolling, whining in pain, but he gathered himself and scrambled on, heading eastward until to his sensitive nostrils there came the tang of water from a slough lake at whose sedges the tired doe was already bogged down.

Whimpering as the water struck his scorched belly, Hak moved in and soon, blowing hard, he sank into the cooling muck, to send out plaintive calls for Maka, his mother.

Maka had sent her black cub scampering to safety from the fire, but she whirled to search one thicket after another. Her desire to find Hak overcame her great fear of the red tide of death. She plunged through thickets already ablaze in parts. Now and then she picked up bear scent, but could scarcely identify her son's scent, for all scent was tainted with the acrid tang of burning herbage, bark and resinous gum.

Mad, whipping whirlwinds lashed at her. She pawed at her badly scorched left ear, but she went on, calling, whimpering, valiantly searching for Hak.

When at last she picked up his trail and called loudly, the fire gods hurled back her voice. Timorously now she crept on, looking for a path through the burning timber. Suddenly she bunched herself and sprang, but not quickly enough. A gum-filled dry tamarac, ablaze from root to top, crashed and caught Maka in mid-leap, smashing her to the ground. She heaved and lunged frantically and finally freed her big form

from under the blazing trunk of the tree.

She pulled herself forward, but her shoulders pained her so that she could barely stand. Choking, gasping, she sagged to the ground, then rose and dragged herself along her back trail. Now and then her ears pricked sharply as she heard the freak thunder storm returning, whirling back from the hill country.

Before the rain returned, Maka had found a marsh in which she sank groaning in her great misery of pain and fatigue. In the interest of her young one she had fought a valiant battle, but the fire had mocked her, spurned her efforts, beaten her back.

As the rain at last struck her, she half rose, but sagged back exhausted. She would heal, but never again would Maka hold sway as queen of the Swan River country.

She lay through the steamy dawn, on through most of the day.

It was two days later that she recovered her black cub and led it slowly back to the den. Hunger beset them, but Maka was wise enough to rest. She would require strength from now on—strength with which to locate sufficient food for herself and her cub in a desolate, fire-ravaged range. Shortly the roaring snow wind would swoop down.

Maka at last turned toward the creek. Her only hope lay in the possibility of catching a fall run of pike or grayling.

At the shallows, her young one close at her side, she moaned—calling always, calling, for Hak, her son.

THE winter had come. Hak was fat and strong. He had stuck to the trail of the antlered bucks and their does, finding food and protection wherever their trails led him.

But when the heavier snows came, the food supply was suddenly cut short. It was a comparatively mild winter and Hak felt no immediate urge to den up. His belly craved more food and as he moved on alone, a tantalizing smell came to him.

The scent of man alerted him, causing him to move with greater caution, but he kept on. His weeks with the wary deer had taught him much. Now on his own, he put his learning into practice.

It was thus Hak came to the first of trapper Lee's food caches.

Hak quickly climbed a tree to its cache platform and for the first time in his young life sank his teeth into bacon, giving an excited whimper of delight. . . .

Dan Lee discovered the damage done, but was not wholly unprepared, for he had picked up the trail of a young bear whose tracks he had taken for wolverine tracks. He swore in his bitterness and at once began to set traps.

Hak was inexperienced. Later, when he came to a cache tree, he boldly began to climb, only to topple down, squealing with the pain from torn paws. The man had nailed large fish hooks to the tree hole. This was one of man's ruses for outwitting Tarat, the wolverine.

On the ground, Hak whirled, snarling. Man had bested him, and with the pugnacious spirit of his sire charging through his brain, he stormed at a clump of brush, biting and smashing.

Hunger forced him to plunder a marten set. He savagely killed the entrapped creature and feasted, his eyes glittering.

On discovery of the robbed trap, the man swore in bitter anger, then skilfully blended flour with bacon grease, and laid a trail of this almost right to his main cabin, where he set to work to build special pole sets.

He snarled disgustedly when first he found a lean tom lynx in one of the small enclosures.

Next morning, shortly after daybreak, he bounded from his bunk, dressed hurriedly, and snatching down his rifle, he hurtled out of doors. Some larger creature was threshing around in a small pole

house trap set in which Lee had placed a chunk of fat pork.

The man quivered as he approached the trap. He expected to find a large wolverine inside, but as he peered through chinks between the poles he gasped.

"Sun-bear!" he cried. "Prettiest I ever saw!"

Lee was right. Not in all the Swan Hills range was there a handsomer specimen than Hak, the son of Maka.

Lee raised his riffe, thrusting the muzzle in between two poles, but suddenly he smiled and withdrew the rifle. He could hold this young bear a prisoner until spring. He would grow, and his coat prime up to a thing of great beauty. It would not be difficult to build a bigger pole structure to enclose the cinnamon. He would have lots of food—corn meal mush and the offal from his trapped animals. . . .

Thus Hak found himself enclosed in a stout pole stockade from which, try as he could, there seemed no possibility of escape. For many days he prowled about the area, whining, snarling, refusing all offers of food, until his sides grew lean and gaunt. Hunger pangs stabbed incessantly.

Then Hak began to feed. As his belly became filled, he began to exercise. Daily he searched for some avenue of escape. In the early dawn he turned and sniffed into the westerly wind and called loudly for Maka, his mother. He resumed his attempts to escape.

In a corner of the stockade was a small hut shelter with a bed of dry slough grass. Hak moved into this and for a couple of days holed up to sleep fitfully. He awakened from time to time to snarl savagely and his temper soured day by day as the winter dragged on. Every now and then Hak was startled by the scent and sight of the man creature returning to his main cabin with bales of pelts.

Then came a long period when the man did not come. There was no food, and Hak whimpered as the hunger pains stabbed him. He could not know that the man creature had been hurt by a fall and had been forced to lie up at one of his line cabins.

Starving now, Hak charged up the insloping poles of his stockade, toppled down again and again. He growled as he threshed about the stockade and then savagely bit at a pole. His fangs sank deep into the green poplar and he spat the chips from his mouth. Throughout the day he continued to bite and tear, even though his jaws ached and his gums bled.

AT LAST, he forced his body out through a jagged gap in the enclosure. He turned and circled the cabin, drawing closer when he detected no danger scent of the man. But other scents came to him soft, seductive food scents. His eyes flashed as he smashed at the door.

Its catch gave at last and Hak toppled inside. Before full dawn broke, Hak's belly was full. He lay grunting in a small log annex where the man stored his food and his pelt bales. In his savagery Hak had torn and scattered many valuable fox and marten pelts, ripped open sacks of flour and rolled oats.

Though his belly was stuffed, he continued to feed. When at last he caught the dread scent of the man, he seized the last half side of bacon in his strong jaws and went scampering off to the cover of the tamarac belt, just as Dan Lee limped painfully into the clearing.

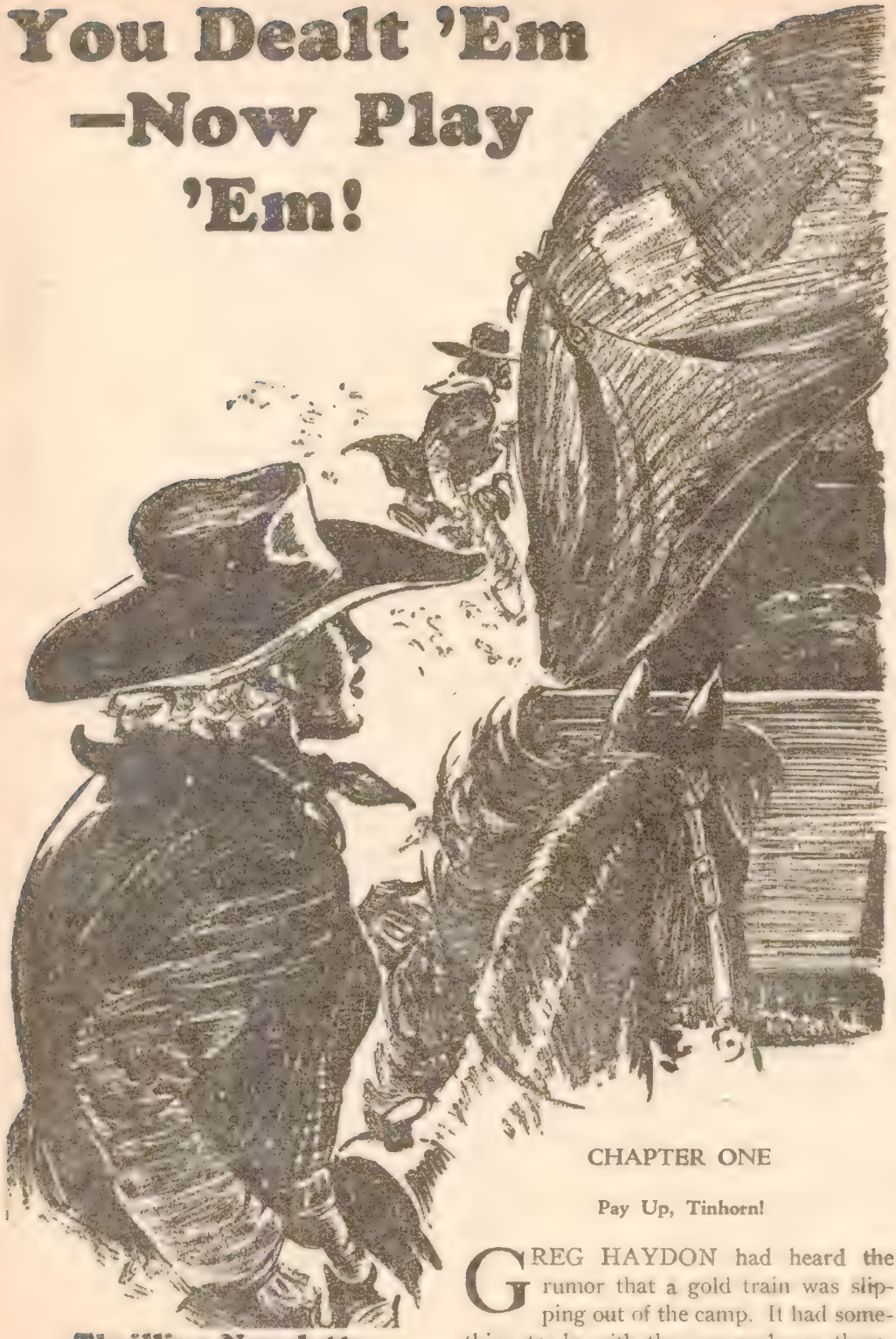
"Heavy—wind, I reckon!" Lee said, looking at the open door. Suddenly he swore bitterly. He stepped indoors and quickly struck a match to light his lantern.

"Carcajou!" he gasped as he surveyed the damage. He stood just inside the annex, quivering in despair and anger. Then, in a lantern's light, he picked up sign. Snarling, he whirled and limped to the outside, moving toward the stockade.

"Gone! It was him, after all! The sun-

(Continued on page 129)

You Dealt 'Em —Now Play 'Em!



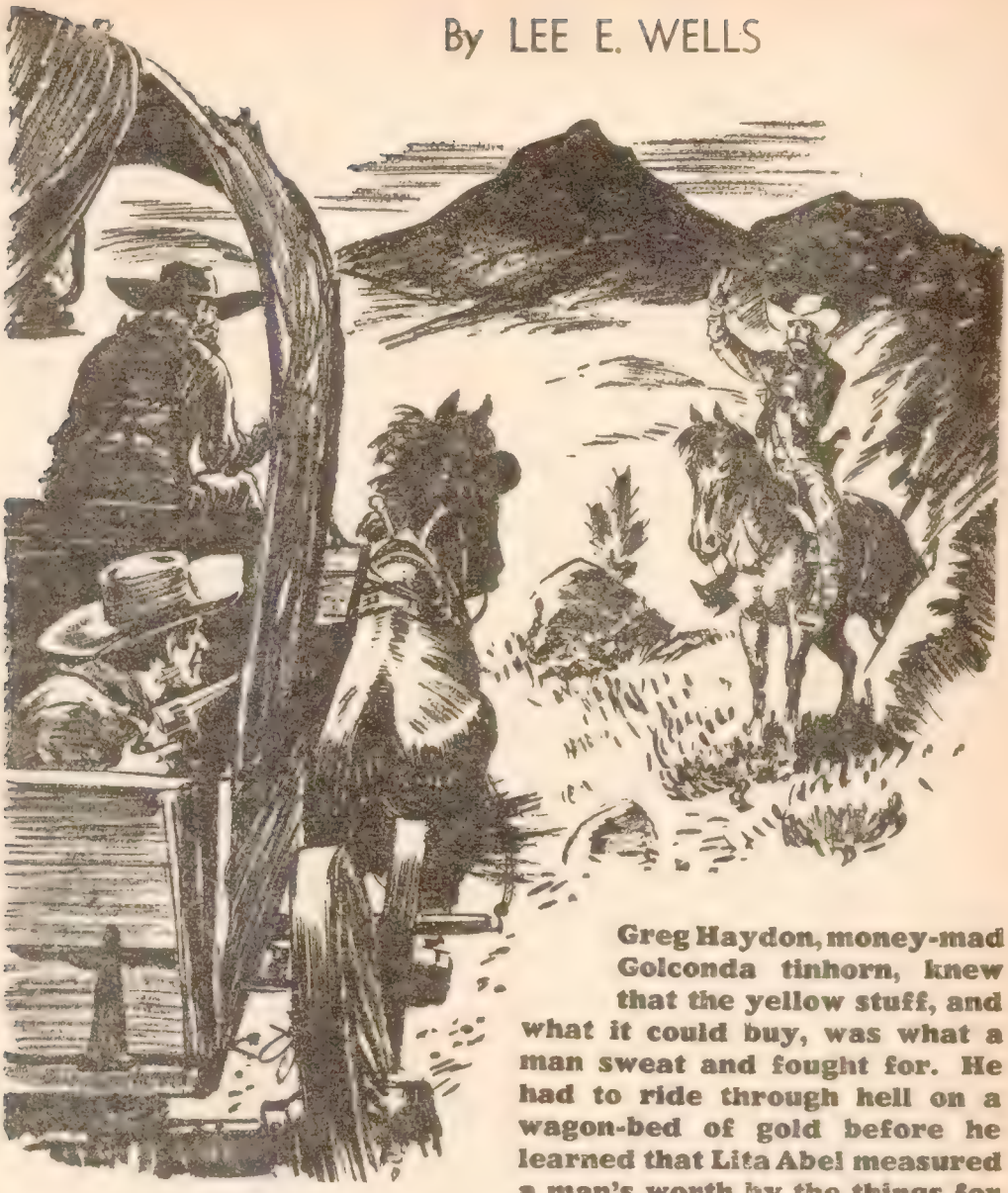
Thrilling Novelette of the Old Southwest

CHAPTER ONE

Pay Up, Tinhorn!

GREG HAYDON had heard the rumor that a gold train was slipping out of the camp. It had something to do with the war and was therefore of no real importance to him. Some-

By LEE E. WELLS



Greg held his gun ready as he peered out.

Greg Haydon, money-mad Golconda tinhorn, knew that the yellow stuff, and what it could buy, was what a man sweat and fought for. He had to ride through hell on a wagon-bed of gold before he learned that Lita Abel measured a man's worth by the things for which he would gladly die!

where far beyond the horizon great armies of blue and gray were fighting and dying, and the destiny of a nation stood in the balance. That was unimportant to Greg Haydon, too.

Of greater importance were the men who faced him across the table in this smoke-filled room, the five bits of pasteboard he held in his fingers, and the big stack of chips that stood ready by his hand. So long as there were cards and gullible fools to gamble good gold on them, Greg Haydon had no worries.

Jode Ivar threw in his hand with a growl of disgust and pushed back from the table, anger showing on his hatchet face. Greg glanced at him coolly.

"Better luck next hand, Jode. So long

as you've got a chip you've got a chance."

"With the way you handle the cards?" Jode demanded and his tone caused the other men to look up. Greg quietly placed his cards face down on the table. He seemed unruffled except for a slight bunching of the muscles in his jaw.

"That needs explaining, Jode," he said evenly.

"Shut up, Jode," Hank Ivar rumbled. The big man settled his bulk down in the chair and his muddy eyes glared at his brother. Jode opened his mouth to protest, then snapped it shut and turned with a muffled curse to the door. He strode out and the tension left the room. Hank shrugged his big shoulders.

"Jode always did blow his breath around. Bet your hand, Greg."

The four men settled to the game and in a very few minutes, two of them threw in their hands, forced out by the dizzy raises between Greg and Hank. At last Ivar shoved in his last chips. The hanging lantern deeply etched the harsh lines of his lips, the great curving beak, the narrow eyes set deep under bony brows.

"How do you meet it?"

"I won't force you out," Greg smiled. "If your hand's worth your last chip, it's worth a look at my cards. I meet and call."

"Full house, queens and fours," Hank's powerful hand spread the cards on the table and he stared at Greg.

"Too bad," Greg sighed. "Full, aces over eights."

Hank stared at the cards and rubbed his tongue around the inside of his cheek. He slapped his palms down on the table as a wondering sigh arose from the other two. When Hank stood up, he looked like a giant, and Greg leaned back so that his right hand was free and clear of the table.

"Maybe Jode wasn't far wrong at that," Hank said, but he made no hostile move. He frowned down at the cards and then his thick lips slowly twisted into a grin. "Aces over eights—the dead man's hand. had you thought of that, Greg?"

Hank chuckled and turned away, his heavy tread shaking the little shack as he walked to the door and closed it behind him.

Greg lifted the gold pokes from the floor and placed them on the table, smiling at the two men.

"No pay out for the bank tonight, unless you gentlemen want a few more hands."

"We're busted," one said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the door. "Haydon, you'd better watch out for them Ivar brothers. Jode's sneaking mean and Hank don't mind another killing."

"I'll take my chances," Gregg shrugged. "This camp's no tougher than others I've been in."

"Just watch 'em," the man repeated and left with his companion.

GREG bolted the door after them and made sure the blinds were completely down at the two windows. He looked around the small room, the table in the center, the iron stove in one corner, his cot in another. It wasn't much to look at but it had certainly added to Greg's stake.

He lifted the gold pokes from the table and carried them to the corner behind the stove. Picking up a floor board, he placed the pokes with a stack of others in the cache and his narrow, gambler's hand caressed the rough shape of the sacks. For a moment his harsh, handsome face grew soft and his wide brown eyes glowed. A few more weeks, months at the most, and he'd leave these God-forsaken gold camps and border towns for good. There'd be fine clothes and carriages, lovely women, dinners and theaters in New York—or, if he liked—London and Paris.

For some reason, his mind suddenly recalled the rumor of the gold train. It would carry bullion for the hard-pressed Yankee treasury—if it ever reached its destination. Between gold hungry rene-

gades, warlike Indians and patriotic Johnny Rebs, there was a good chance it wouldn't get through. Greg touched his sacks again.

Here, at least, were nuggets that would be used sensibly. They'd buy the good things of life for Greg Haydon, not arms, ammunitions and supplies for a damn fool war. Greg replaced the board and then brought some semblance of order to the room. He removed his coat, flowered vest and the stubby derringer that snuggled in a holster under his left arm pit.

There was still a hazy smoke in the room and Greg felt restless. He opened the door, after he blew out the lamp, and stepped out into the night. His shack stood on a slight knoll that overlooked Golconda camp and its myriad lights.

Greg inhaled deeply of the sharp, sage-tanged air. He heard the distant thud of a gun and knew that another man had died in the riotous camp below. Greg lit a cheroot and strolled aimlessly a short distance down the path. Lord, how he longed to escape from this wild, crude country and get into civilization again! Perhaps had he continued with his law studies—Greg pushed the thought aside. Over and done now, and a man lived with himself as he was, not as he might have been.

Greg turned and started back to the shack. He was within a few feet of it when a shadow moved to the right. His head swivelled in that direction, every sense alert. A step sounded to the left and before he could turn, a gun muzzle bored into his side.

"The dead man's hand," Hank Ivar said. His voice lifted. "I've got him, Jode."

Jode came up and his hands slapped along Greg's body in search of a weapon. Satisfied, he stepped back and then his fist smashed into Greg's face. Greg pulled himself from the ground, shaking his head to clear it. Starlight made a faint gleam on Hank's Colt as the muzzle lined on him.

The big man spoke mockingly. "Now, Jode, that ain't no way to treat a gent that'll make us rich. You reckon he'll want to show us his cache if we act that way?"

"Don't make much difference," Jode grunted. "We can find it if he won't talk."

"Do you think you can get away with this?" Greg demanded.

Hank chuckled. "Clean as a whistle, Greg. First we'll have a look at your cache, then we'll all take a little ride out in the desert somewhere, clean away from the town. Maybe someone'll find you next week, or next year—or never. But you won't mind none." His tone changed. "Turn around and start walking!"

Jode scuttled ahead into the shack while Hank marched close behind Greg, the gun muzzle making a hard pressure on his spine. By the time they reached the shack, Jode had lit the lamp, and was waiting with a twisted grin as Greg marched in and Hank kicked the door shut. They made a strange trio; hulking Hank Ivar, slender Greg Haydon and the thin, pinch-faced Jode.

"We ain't got much time to waste," Hank said. "Where's your cache?"

"Find it," Greg snapped. He expected the attack from Jode, but Hank slammed the gun muzzle along his jaw. Lights flashed in Greg's brain and he felt himself falling. He hit the floor and he was only dimly aware that Hank jerked him to his feet again.

FROM out of nowhere a battering fist smashed into his stomach and then slammed into his face. All sensation ceased on the instant. He awakened, choking, as he felt water being poured onto his face. He was aware that Jode stood grinning over him, an empty bucket in his hands. Lamplight hurt his eyes, his head and body were one solid ache.

Someone picked him up and slammed him into a chair. He sat swaying, head hanging low. Hank's rough fingers grabbed his chin and forced his head up.

The big man scowled at him. "You're wasting time, Haydon, and doing yourself no good. Where'd you hide it?"

Greg's bruised lips mumbled over the words and his tongue felt thick. Despite the pain, he had a seething contempt for the giant who stood over him, and a deep knowledge that whether he talked or not, he would not be allowed to live.

"Go to hell! Find it—yourself!" he gasped.

The blow landed squarely on his chin and he heard the chair splinter. The back of his head struck the wall and once more merciful unconsciousness blanked him out.

When he came to, he tried to move but couldn't. Pain beat a steady rhythm in his body as something jolted him at regular intervals. He couldn't understand it and his eyes blinked open. He realized he hung head downward and he stared at rocky, moonlit ground that slowly moved beyond his vision. He heard the creak of saddle leather, the soft thud of hoofs. He had been placed over a saddle, arms and legs lashed down tightly. He held grimly onto his senses and, after a gigantic effort, managed to lift his head a little.

Another horse strode close by and Greg saw Hank Ivar's giant boot in the stirrup. Greg fleetingly wondered if his gold had been found and where the men were taking him. Then his head dropped.

Sometime later, motion ceased and Greg's eyes opened again. Rough hands tugged at the ropes that held him and then he slid helplessly to the ground, gravel grinding into his face. Someone jerked him over and he stared up into Jode's hatchet face.

"You won't cheat no one else, tinhorn. We found your cache."

Greg realized the man held a Colt, hammer dogged back. Jode stepped away and Greg dully stared at him as the man swung into saddle, then levelled the gun.

"I hope the buzzards get you," Jode gloated. The gun blossomed flame and smoke. At the same instant a red hot metal bar plunged into Greg's chest. There was a moment of searing pain and then he could feel nothing. Darkness enveloped him.

CHAPTER TWO

Death in the Cards

THE voice was soft and came from a distance. It was a voice without form; a curious echo that pulled at Greg, bringing him closer to his pain. He tried to struggle against the tug of the voice but it was no use. The ragged edges of agony touched and then engulfed him and he was once more aware of his tortured body.

The voice was closer now and he associated it with a woman. "Will he live? What can we do?"

In some vague manner this concerned Greg but he couldn't tell exactly why or how. Then another voice came, deeper, like a series of bass notes that thundered in his swirling brain.

"I don't know. Can't let him just lay here, though that's what we oughta do if we're to have a chance to get through. Davis, give me a hand here."

There was no more for awhile and then, abruptly, Greg's eyes opened. His body jolted and he felt each painful jar.

The girl had placed her hand on his forehead and the light made a golden halo of her hair. Her dark eyes were soft and compassionate and slowly widened in surprise when he looked at her. Her face lighted and her lips parted slightly.

"You're awake!" she exclaimed. Greg tried to smile but never knew if he succeeded.

When he awoke a man with a wrinkled, rawhide face bent over him, the girl breathless at his shoulder.

The girl exclaimed softly. "Dad! He's come around again."

The old man stared sharply at Greg. "Think you'll stay with us this time?"

"I think so." Greg was mighty surprised at the sound of his own voice and he realized that he no longer was detached and floating. His body ached and he felt a big lump of bandages on his chest. He realized that he lay beneath the canvas top of a wagon, the pallet spread on the floor between big burlap bags.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"Heading into New Mexico," the man answered. "You'll land up in Colorado if we're lucky, or if you don't get on your feet before then. I'm Abel Kerns and this is my daughter, Lita."

"New Mexico!" Greg breathed in surprise. "But Golconda's clear across the Territory! I was there just last—" He stopped, not knowing exactly when he had been in Golconda.

"Ten days ago," Abel finished for him. "We found you lying in a swale, and I wouldn't have given a counterfeit peso for your chances then. Lita here brought you through and you've got her to thank."

"The bullet just missed your lung," the girl said, "and your face looked as though someone had kicked it in. It's—it's not pretty even now."

"Hank Ivar!" Greg whispered. Kern and Lita stared at him, the man's lean face tightening.

"What do you know about Hank and Jode Ivar?" Kern demanded harshly.

"They were the ones who shot me," Greg said, "after they'd used their fists and a gun barrel. There'd been a game at my shack and they lost. They looted my cache and rode me out of town to finish me off in the desert."

"Sounds like 'em," Kern growled. "The Ivars and their men are looking for us this minute. But who are you? And what's your business?"

"Greg Haydon. I—"

"The gambler!" Lita said and her voice held a note of scorn. Abel shook his head. "Hell, we thought you might be a help if it come to a showdown. But what good's a tinhorn? About as trustworthy as a blasted sidewinder."

He turned and left the wagon, leaving Greg to stare wonderingly at Lita. Her eyes had grown cool and distant and she inspected his bandages as though she did her duty against her will.

Greg finally spoke irritably. "What's wrong with gambling? It's a good living."

"You wouldn't understand," Lita said coldly. "I suppose gamblers have a reason for existing, but I've never been able to discover it. I'll be back after supper to look at those bandages."

"Don't bother," Greg said sarcastically.

She gave him a smile without warmth. "It's no bother—just duty."

SHE was gone. The wagon creaked along and Greg stared up at the canvas top. His eyes turned to the burlap bags around him and he wondered what they might contain. He wondered why the Ivars were looking for the Kerns and why Abel and Lita were heading for Colorado. Above all, why should there be a showdown and the Kerns need the help of another man?

Slowly the light from the rear of the wagon mellowed and grew red, then began to fade. Greg felt the wagon circle, and a deep voice called "Whoa!" to the horses as the brake shoe squealed against the wheels. The wagon halted and Greg could hear people stirring outside. Night came and a dim light played fitfully on the canvas. Then a lantern glowed and Lita appeared.

She was tall and graceful, Greg saw, and the travel-stained calico dress could not hide the lovely lines of her body. But

the yellow glow from the lantern deepened the worry lines around her eyes, and the grim set of her mouth still marked her disapproval. It irritated him that this girl should judge and condemn him.

She placed the lantern in a corner and silently examined his bandage. Her fingers were soft and gentle, and when she looked up, he caught a pleased light in her eyes. But she said nothing, merely left the wagon to return in a minute with a plate of food and a cup of coffee. She started to feed him, but Greg protested.

"I can take care of myself. I've been doing it for years."

She didn't argue, merely placed the plate and cup beside him and sat back to watch. Greg glared at her and then tried to lift himself up. The first movement sent a wave of pain through him but he gritted his teeth and fought against it. He lifted himself partially up, cold sweat beading his forehead and then, with a moan, sank back on his pillow.

Lita wiped the sweat from his face. "You were mistaken—as you've been about many things. Now lie still while I get some nourishment down you."

He meekly accepted her ministrations and decided, within a few minutes, that he liked her to wait on him. At last the meal was finished and Lita started to arise.

"Don't go—just yet," Greg said. She sank back, showing a faint surprise. "How long will I be down like this?"

"Dad says you'll be able to sit up before long. You're lucky the bullet didn't enter a quarter of an inch farther down. You've got some bad cuts on your face but they're healing." She paused. "I imagine you'll be ready to take honest people's money from them by the time we reach Colorado."

Greg was silent a moment. "You don't like gambling—or gamblers. Did you ever think it's one way of making a living? An honest gambler—"

"Honest?" she broke in with the disdainful question. "When did you ever give real value for any of the money you've taken over the tables? Did you work for it? Really earn it?"

"Well—no," Greg admitted reluctantly. "But—"

"Have you ever made one effort to help build anything? What did you expect to do with the money you've won? I can imagine. Fine clothes, wines, dinners. And what good would it do to anyone beside yourself?"

Greg stared at her. He wanted to protest violently and yet he knew that he couldn't. She had listed his ambitions and, in some strange way, she made them sound tawdry and useless rather than glamorous and exciting. She saw that he was puzzled and troubled and she suddenly smiled. Her whole face transformed into a beauty that made Greg catch his breath.

Impulsively she placed her hand on his shoulder. "You'd better rest—and think things over. Maybe you'll be worth something by the time you reach Colorado."

She picked up the empty plate and cup, lifted the lantern. She stood looking down at him, hesitantly. She turned her head, staring through the coarse weave of the canvas arch.

"If—if shooting should start," she said at last, "lie still. You'll be fairly safe and you shouldn't move around. The rest of us will take care of things. Good night."

"Wait!" he checked her. His eyes narrowed as he searched her face. "Just what are you carrying that'd cause trouble?"

"Supplies," she answered, but Greg caught the slight hesitation. "Supplies for the Union troops that they need very badly. Naturally, certain people don't want them to get through."

"Naturally," Greg said with a slight grin, and Lita instantly became suspicious.

"I don't know what your sympathies are—"

"You forget, I'm a gambler and I don't count for much. I've never taken sides since it's none of my business."

"You *are* useless, aren't you?" she murmured.

Before he could answer, she turned and left the wagon. He lay on the pallet, frowning angrily into the darkness. He could hear low, deep voices beyond the wagon and once he heard Lita's lifting laugh. Greg moved restlessly, wincing as pain shot through his chest.

His out-stretched hand touched the coarse weave of one of the bags. His fingers felt a hard substance and he traced the shape of it—a bar. Greg, moving his hand more swiftly, found another bar and a third. He had been too long in the mining camps not to know what they were. Bars of gold—bullion.

HE FOUND two more sacks of bars close beside his pallet, but above this cache had been stacked the food stores of the train. He guessed that there must be other wagons, and that the treasure had been divided among them, hidden deep beneath sacks of flour and potatoes.

Greg folded his hands across his chest and stared thoughtfully ahead of him. No wonder the Ivar brothers wanted this cargo. It represented a tremendous amount of wealth, a lure for every renegade.

Since Greg had heard of the gold shipment back in Golconda, he knew that the rumor had spread. By now Confederate men would be planning to attack and rob their enemies of the sinews of war. Greg made a soundless whistle in the darkness.

As a gambler he wondered if Lita and Abel Kern realized the odds they bucked. It was like holding a ten and a jack, and trying to draw the ace, king, queen. He thought of Lita's contempt for him, and he squirmed a little. If only he wasn't tied to this damn' pallet maybe he could slip the Kerns another card and lower the odds. One more sixgun would help.

CHAPTER THREE

Apache Attack

THE ripping crash of rifle fire jerked him awake. He half arose and felt as though an invisible hand had driven a knife into his chest. He sank back, moaning, angered at his helplessness. There was a slight lessening of the darkness and he realized that it was probably just dawn.

He listened to the crash of rifles and heard the wild ululating yell that told him the attackers were Indian. An arrow cut through the canvas, struck the other side and dropped, its force spent. The daylight increased and Greg scowled at the colored feathers of the Apaches."

The firing increased and the savage yelling came closer. Greg thought of Lita out there and he clenched his hands. Finally he could stand it no longer. He threw aside the covers and, biting his lip to counteract the pain, slowly inched himself toward the high tail gate.

It was an eternity away, and every inch stretched out to a mile. Pain wrenched at his chest, and he felt something warm and sticky under the bandages. He had no idea what he could do to help; he knew only the necessity of joining in the fight. At last his outstretched fingers touched the rough boards of the tailgate and he lay full length, gasping for breath, gathering his strength to climb over the wooden barrier.

With startling abruptness the rifle fire ceased. There followed two or three scattered shots, a defiant, fading yell, and then all was silence. Greg lifted his head, straining to listen. Someone stirred just beneath the wagon and a hoarse voice called a question.

"Who's hurt?"

There was a moment of silence during which Greg held his breath. Then he

heard Lita, and relief swept over him like a cooling wave.

"Charlie. But not much. He's got a scratch on his arm." No one else is hurt at all.

Greg lowered his head, felt all his strength drain out of his body. He dimly heard movement beyond the wagon and then suddenly an amazed excalamtion just above him. He felt himself lifted and placed back on the pallet.

He looked up at Abel Kern's harsh face. The man's voice was not quite so chill. "Just what in hell did you try to do?"

"I heard the attack. I thought—I might help."

"Fat lot of help—" Abel started and checked himself. He looked at Greg with a new respect. "I'll give you credit for guts, something I didn't think a tinhorn had. Lita, better look after him. We're pulling out before those 'Paches come back with their friends."

He moved away and Lita took his place. She shook her head worriedly when she saw the fresh blood on his bandages and, while the wagon rolled slowly on, she changed the dressing.

At last she finished and sat back. "It was very brave of you to want to help us. Dad saw that, too, but he didn't know exactly how to say it."

"Abel had the right idea," Greg smiled. "It was a fool move, since I couldn't do anything against the Indians. It was Apaches, wasn't it?"

"A small band," she nodded, "who thought if they could catch us by surprise, they'd even the odds. They didn't. Three of them were killed and no real damage was done to us. But we were talking of you."

"Don't," he shook his head. His fingers touched one of the bags and Lita stiffened slightly. "It's gold bullion. No wonder your father is taking a round-about way to Colorado."

SHE said nothing for a moment, then realized the secret was out. She lifted her slender shoulders in a shrug. "We're trying to reach an Army post where a treasury official will receive the gold. We wanted to keep the shipment a secret but I don't think we did."

"I knew about it in Golconda before—my accident." He was silent a moment. "Could you place a Colt and gunbelt here beside me, Lita? It's just one more gun when you need it."

"Maybe I've been wrong about you," she said. "You have some spark of patriotism and decency after all."

"You're still wrong," he shook his head. "They can fight back east until they kill off one another for all of me. I've lost nothing, and want nothing that they're fighting for."

"But, everything depends on it!"

"Does it?" he demanded. He lifted his hands and flexed his fingers. "No matter who wins or loses, there'll still be money of some kind floating around. We'll still have to find some way of making a living under the Stars and Bars or the Stars and Stripes. I want you and Abel Kern to win through, but that's because I want nothing to harm you and, I'd like to keep my own skin unpunctured."

She stared at him, eyes wide. Then she flushed angrily and arose. "Tinhorn! Tinhorn in thought as well as deed. You've got a lot to learn."

She flounced out of the wagon, and Greg did not see her for the rest of the day. At the brief noon halt a bearded man brought his food and left. The afternoon dragged endlessly and Greg dozed off several times. At last, just before sundown, the wagons stopped.

Not long after Lita came again. She placed a gunbelt by Greg's pallet. "There's your Colt."

"Good. I wonder if I could be moved to the tailgate where I can see what's going on. A six won't do me much good

back in here. I can't even see outside."

"I'll see," she said shortly. "Personally, I can't understand why you bother."

"You forget," he said with a twisted smile, "a lot of my plans depend on you."

She left hurriedly after a scornful glance at him. Abel Kern and two men came later, moving the pallet so that it would not be too much of an effort for Greg to reach the top of the tailgate. Abel gave Greg his supper and sat quietly by as he ate. He pulled steadily on an old pipe and from time to time looked searchingly at Greg.

"You're a funny critter," he said at last, "from what I've seen of you and what Lita says. You ain't a Johnny Reb and yet you won't stir a finger to do your part for the other side, either."

"Neutral," Greg answered and sipped his coffee.

Abel shook his head. "That's just a word in times like these. You might fool yourself back in Golconda for a little while —but not here. Now, against my wishes and yours, you're in the middle of it." He changed the subject with surprising suddenness. "Have you always been a gambler? No other job?"

"Always," Greg answered and leaned back against the sideboards. He looked out and up into the dark sky where a single star blinked impersonally at him. "Might have been a lawyer if things hadn't worked out as they did."

"Bad luck?"

"You might call it a lesson. Mother was a widow and Father's inheritance was putting me through school. Had a year to go before I'd start reading law. Some smooth-tongued brigand talked my mother into putting everything she had in bogus stock, not worth the pretty paper it was printed on. She lost everything, even the house that she'd mortgaged to buy more worthless shares."

"You could have gone on," Abel suggested. "You look strong enough to work. There's always some way out."

"Sure, I could have," Greg nodded, "and what would my mother have done? I swore that if a woman like her could be robbed blind of every cent she had, then I could get it back. I did—gambling."

"Where is it?" Abel asked.

"The Ivar brothers got it. But it's only for a time. Someone else will start making it up to me."

"Someone else," Abel nodded in apparent agreement. "Did you ever get the money back from the crook that robbed your mother? Did you ever cheat him like he cheated her?"

"I never heard of him again," Greg answered shortly. "Not that I wouldn't like to."

"Then for all these years you've taken your spite out on folks that did no harm to your mother."

Greg's head jerked around and he stared at Abel, dimly discernable in the faint light. Greg felt his face flush and his voice tightened. "I just got even. Mother was robbed blind and it was only fair."

"Only fair to get that gent who harmed her," Abel cut in. He arose and sighed. "I've never yet run into a tinhorn, gambler or otherwise, that could think straight worth a damn. You're no exception, Haydon, though I had hopes you might be. Good night."

HE LEFT, and Greg heard his heavy tread fade away toward the distant campfire. Greg shifted a little and discovered that he could move with more comfort. He was deep in thought and memory when Lita held the lantern up from the end of the wagon.

"Need anything?" she asked cooly.

"Yes," Greg said impulsively. "Someone to talk to."

"We don't speak the same language," she said.

"I think that's exactly what I need. I've been pretty satisfied with life for several

years. Now you and Abel have shuffled a new deck and I don't like the looks of the cards."

"Truth, I've heard, sometimes hurts." She sat on the edge of the wagon, leaning back against the side. Greg watched her for a moment or two and then started talking softly of the things that had shaped his life. Lita listened quietly and Greg sensed that she was honestly interested.

"All right," he finished, "suppose I have pulled some fast and slick deals to even the score? They've been few and far between and I give every man an equal chance as the cards fall. What's wrong with that?"

"The same thing that's wrong with your disregard of what's happening in Virginia and along the Mississippi," she answered quietly. "You're so self-centered and egotistical that you've set yourself up as a judge and a jury and you've made your viewpoint the law, regardless of whom it hurts."

"Hard words," Greg said.

"But true enough. Nor have you ever given a fair chance. The cards are your profession. You can judge the percentages and play with them so close that sooner or later you'll come out on top. Dad thinks he's a fair poker player but, given time, you'd take everything we have. And you'd call it fair. Is it?"

She lowered herself to the ground and smiled up at him, the rancor gone from her voice. "A hard day tomorrow and I'd better find my blankets. Pleasant dreams."

She walked away and disregarded his call to stay. He lay back on his pallet and it was a long time before he went to sleep.

The days went slowly but now, back where he could get a view of the train, Greg found his interest reviving as his strength increased. There were three wagons and a crew of perhaps twenty men, well mounted and well armed. They were a capable looking lot and Greg now understood why the Apaches had been beaten off so quickly. Those men had also undoubtedly made the Ivar brothers hesitate to hit the train.

But Greg had no illusions about Hank and Jode. With this much gold in one place, the Ivars would make at least one determined effort to grab it. They probably bided their time, simply waiting for the moment when all the chances would be in their favor.

At one of the Indian pueblos, Abel Kern heard that an armed band of white men was somewhere up ahead. This might mean anything—or nothing. Santa Fe, in Confederate hands, might easily have patrols out this far. On the other hand, these armed men might be under orders to find or intercept the gold train. Greg mentally added a third possibility, that the Ivars had gathered gunslingers and renegades and were getting ready to strike.

Abel ordered extra precautions on the trail and in camp. They started a wide circle around Santa Fe, hoping to avoid any contacts with patrols. They passed another Indian pueblo and camped close. Abel and two of his men rode over for a parley. They returned grim-faced.

"Someone's just a day ahead of us," Kern said, squatting down by the fire. Greg leaned forward from his pallet, straining to hear. "I figure we got more'n a patrol to worry about, the way those gents keep moving up ahead of us."

"Johnny Rebs?" one of the men asked.

Abel nodded. "That—or worse. We'll be hitting some rough country pretty soon and there'll be plenty of places to set up an ambush. It's got me worried."

"We'll get through," Lita said confidently. Greg lifted himself up on one elbow.

"THAT'S whistling in the wind, and you know it," he said. Abel checked Lita's swift protest and the growls of the men. He arose and came to the wagon.

"You're right about that. What do you suggest?"

"A gamble," Greg answered readily and he checked Abel's disgusted snort. "I've learned one thing at the poker tables, and that's how to think the way the other man does. Here you've got three wagons and so many armed men that you're fairly shouting your secret to every Johnny Reb and renegade."

"We've got to guard the gold."

"Sure," Greg agreed, "and that's exactly what everyone else knows. So they plan an ambush or at least a good strong bid for the bullion. If I was Hank Ivar, for instance, I'd certainly trail a big train like this."

"What else could we do?" Lita demanded.

"Transfer the gold to one wagon," Greg said. "Put just two men with it, a driver and an out-rider. The rest of you go ahead with the others, guards and all. What do you think will happen?"

Abel stared at him and Lita was silent. The ring of men that had formed around them looked blankly at one another and then they began to grin, more widely. Abel rubbed his jaw.

"A wagon with just two men," Greg insisted, "wouldn't carry bullion. I'd bet my life you could tie the wagon and team up in front of any saloon between here and Colorado and no one would think twice about it. It'd be plain crazy to leave all that gold unguarded. That's what the soldiers and the Ivars would think."

"They'd watched the big crowd," Abel nodded.

"And the train would get the attack when it comes. By then, the other wagon could be miles away and safe enough. It's a gamble, of course, but for once it'd be worth it."

"Almost too big a gamble," Abel said uncertainly.

"Then lower the odds." Greg insisted. "Get a wagon at the next ranch, put the gold in it. When it pulls out, there'll still be three wagons in the train."

Abel scratched his head and then his shoulders squared back as though he had thrown off a heavy weight.

He smiled. "We'll take the chance. There's a small spread about six miles up ahead. We'll pull in there tomorrow and get a wagon. When dark comes tomorrow night, we'll make the split. By dawn, the wagon should be plumb out of sight."

"And the cats will be watching the wrong rathole," Greg smiled. He sobered. "I'd like to go with the gold wagon, Abel. I could ride in the back of it like I do in this one, and three Colts are slightly better than two. I'd like to back my own play." He glanced at Lita and his eyes softened. "It'd be only right, since this will be my last gamble."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gambler's Blood-Bet

THEY pulled into the ranch just before noon the next day. Not far ahead to the north lay the mountain ranges—and it was in them that trouble would strike. The rancher, a thin rail of a man who heartily cussed his Confederate neighbors, was quite willing to sell the dilapidated wagon that had brought him out here from Illinois.

The men worked like beavers to reinforce the old wagon bed, put in place a ragged and stained canvas top and transfer the bullion. Greg's pallet was put back by the tailgate while he rested gratefully on a sunny bench beside the ranch house. Lita came to help him to the wagon but Greg smiled and waved her aside.

"Let me try it on my own power," he said. He pulled himself to his feet and started slowly across the yard.

His legs were a little wobbly and he

dared not move fast. But slowly, step by step, he made the journey, pausing occasionally as a sharp pain hammered at his chest. At last he reached the wagon and his hands grasped it for support.

He turned and smiled at Lita. "I might be worth something before long."

"You are now," she said impulsively and her face turned fiery red as Greg's eyes lighted and softened.

"You mean that, Lita?" he asked and didn't wait for the answer. "I think this trouble is the best thing that ever happened to me. You and Abel have made me see things that I never realized before."

"We haven't treated you exactly—" she started but Greg didn't let her finish.

"You gave me exactly the treatment I needed. It took your contempt, your straight-out talk to wake me up." He lifted his hands. "I thought they were made for cards but I think lawbooks will fit those fingers just as well."

"Greg! You mean it."

"I mean it." He looked at the wagon. "But maybe I'd better go on east with this gold and see if I can't help down in Virginia. Maybe soldiering will give me a stake so I can read law after the war's over." He took a swift step toward her and had to grab the wagon for support as the pain hit him. Instantly her arms were around his shoulders, as she supported him. He straightened at last, his face pale.

"If you don't mind that bunch of grinning coyotes watching us—"

She kissed him, turned and hurried away as some of the men grinned and one snickered aloud. Greg leaned against the tailgate of the wagon, face bemused and dreamy. Finally he sighed and eased himself up and onto his pallet.

He looked up at the old canvas and at the burlap sacks toward the front of the wagon and he could feel the tingle of Lita's kiss on his lips. He smiled and then laughed at himself.

"Haydon, the gambler, would call you a damn' fool, Greg," he said in a whisper. "You're starting a heavy game with hardly a single chip—and it's worth it."

As soon as night fell, the horses were hitched to the wagon. A competent, hard-eyed man named Davis took up the reins, and a bow-legged fighter called Nevada came riding up.

Abel came to the tailgate and gripped Greg's hand. His voice deepened. "Lita told me how it is," he said. "If you're really riding this new trail, I'm for you. Lita tells me you are."

"As soon as the gold's delivered safely," Greg nodded.

"I'm sending Lita with you," Abel said, and just then the girl rode up. She wore a flop brim hat, an old coat and trousers stuffed into boots. From a distance, she'd look like a carbon copy of Davis or Nevada. Greg's eyes widened.

"She can't go. This is a long, slim chance as it is."

"Sure," Abel agreed, "It's a chance. But we're all pretty certain the rest of us will run into gunsmoke. I don't want Lita in the middle of it. Besides—"

"I want to go with you, Greg," the girl said, leaning down from the saddle.

Greg knew he was beaten and he didn't argue any further. At Abel's nod, the wagon lurched forward and rumbled out of the ranch yard, heading east and south almost directly toward Santa Fe. Greg checked his Colt and the rifle that Abel had placed beside him. Lita and Nevada rode close, silent, feeling the enormity of the chance they took. Davis occasionally spoke softly to the team.

Behind them the ranch lights faded and finally disappeared. There was no moon and Greg was thankful for that. Even so, the hours were vibrant with tension and at any moment they expected a challenge or an attack. But none came and, just

before dawn, Greg suggested that they find some hidden spot to camp.

"Another night trip will put us out of the district. If Abel can keep the Johnny Rebs on his tail that long, then I'll be sure we can make it all right."

Just as the first touches of dawn streaked the sky, Davis found a narrow draw leading into a jumble of low hills. He pulled into the canyon and, half a mile further on, found a narrow valley perfectly suited to camp.

THEY remained there all day, Davis, Nevada and Lita alternating the hours of watching the back trail. There were no pursuers and Greg became more and more hopeful as the sun dipped toward the west and finally disappeared below the horizon. They moved out again when the stars began to glitter in the dark sky.

The night was a repetition of their last march and dawn found them well along the way toward the settlements around Santa Fe. Greg, after a consultation with the others, decided they should openly plod forward, making an early afternoon stop.

About three hours later, Greg's plan had its first test. Davis spoke sharply from the high seat. "Rider a'coming! Haydon, you'd better keep low."

Greg sank down below the high tail gate, then edged himself along the side of the wagon to a place where sunlight gleamed through a small tear. He held his gun ready in his hand as he peered out. Not long after he heard hoofs and a voice hailed the wagon. Through the rip, Greg saw a lean rider rein in and a Texas voice drawl a "Howdy".

Davis applied the wagon brakes and Nevada rode casually up, returning the rider's hail. "This the road to Santa Fe?" Davis asked.

"You're heading right," the Texan nodded.

"Heard the soldiers need supplies," Davis said, "so me'n my daughter figured we'd bring in what we could spare."

"You done the right thing. The troopers ain't in town right now but they will be shortly." The man looked sharply at them. "Did you run into any excitement back along the trail?"

"None whatever," Davis answered truthfully and his voice rose sharply. "There ain't no Yankee troops this way, is there?"

"None I ever heard of, and ain't likely to be," the Texan chuckled. "They'll stay where they belong beyond the mountains. But them damn rascals is trying to slip through a gold train from the Arizona mines. Word come a week ago and we've just been waiting to see what trail they'd take."

"Gold!" Davis whispered and gave a long whistle. "I'd sure like to see some of that metal."

"Who wouldn't. The troops aim to get it for the Confederacy before some renegade grab it off, or them damn Yanks get it safe to a post up in Colorado. I just heard about it and decided to have some excitement. Sure you ain't heard nothing back there?"

"Not a thing," Davis shook his head. "I wish I could ride with you, but I reckon I'd better get this truck into Santa Fe. Give them Yanks hell for me, Mister."

"Sure will," the Texan grinned and reined aside as Davis spoke to the team. Greg dropped flat on the wagon floor and remained there for a long time. At last he cautiously raised his head and looked back along the trail. The Texan was little more than a distant dot as he rode in search of the troopers and the Yankee gold train.

Greg called up to Davis. "Man, you should be on the stage."

"Wasn't bad acting, eh?" Davis asked with a satisfied chuckle. "Wonder what that jasper would've said if he'd seen

our load? Would his eyes've popped!"

Lita held in her horse, and swung in behind the wagon. Her eyes were alight with triumph as she smiled at Greg. "We've passed the test. We're going to win through."

"Maybe," Greg aid, "but I learned long ago not to bet my aces until I had 'em in my hand. It's a long way yet to go."

Not long after, Davis changed directions, intending to pass Santa Fe to the north and strike the road to Raton beyond Taos. They camped that night without disturbance and continued on the next day. Several times they met riders, and once a rancher and his family driving a buckboard. They were given friendly greetings and no one paid any particular attention to the decrepit wagon that rolled sedately toward Raton.

Greg tried to fight down a surging wave of optimism. He knew from sad experience that just when a man felt he was winning, disaster could strike hard and fast. He wanted to be ready for it. Nevada shared Lita's certainty that they would be undisturbed but Davis never once relaxed his vigilance.

THEY were beyond Taos and another day should see them climbing into the high pass that would lead to Colorado and the end of the trail. The firelight flickered high as Lita cooked supper and Greg watched the play of light on her lovely face and slender figure.

Greg's wound had healed fast and he believed now that he could easily sit a saddle. But Lita suggested caution and care and, since there was no extra horse, Greg remained on the pallet during the days. But he left the wagon at night.

Davis grinned as Greg caught his glance across the fire. "You still move like an old woman," the man said, his smile taking the sting from his words, "and your face needs to be put back in shape a little. But by the time you reach Colorado, you'll be hard to hold."

"Harder yet," Greg said, "when I get back from the army."

"And unbeatable in a court room," Lita added.

"Whoa!" Greg protested. "That's a long way off yet."

"Ain't it?" a harsh voice demanded mockingly from beyond the fire and then added sharply. "Don't move if you want to stay healthy. Any of you."

Greg's hand had dropped toward his holstered Colt but it froze at the menace in the voice. Surprised, he felt he should recognize the heavy voice. Davis half turned, his hand slashing toward his gun. Instantly thunder and flame blasted from the darkness and Davis folded over on his face. Lita screamed, choked it off.

"Just stand hitched, Haydon," the heavy voice warned. "I thought we'd taken care of you once. How many lives have you got?"

Hank Ivar, flashed through Greg's mind. Then the big man stepped out of the shadows. Just behind him Jode appeared, his squinted eyes boldly travelling over Lita. Greg sat still and tense as the brothers came up beside Davis. Hank nudged callously at the man with his foot.

"Dead," he grunted.

"Nevada," Lita whispered and Jode grinned.

"Sleeping mighty sound, ma'am, back there in the greasewood. He ain't dead, but he won't wake up for a long, long time."

At Hank's order, Jode circled wide and came up behind Greg. He lifted Greg's Colt with a swift, deft movement of his hand and stepped back.

Hank hunkered down beside the fire, but he kept his six levelled and steady. "You sure led us a wild chase," he said, "and I'll give you credit for being smart. You fooled everyone but me'n Jode, even

those damn Reb troopers that took a hand when we jumped the wagon train."

"They figured they could grab the gold themselves," Jode scowled and then he laughed. "They scattered our boys, but me'n Hank hid close. You should've seen that Rebel captain when he found there wasn't no gold."

"Dad?" Lita asked, the word forced from her lips.

Hank shrugged and grunted. "Last I saw he wasn't hurt none."

"So you ambushed the train and the soldiers trapped you," Greg said with a harsh laugh. Hank scowled and Jode's lurid swearing confirmed Greg's guess.

The big man finally shrugged. "That's about it. Me'n Jode hid out, and when I saw you and the girl wasn't around, I figured about what had happened. We headed out as soon as we could slip away and picked up your trail. Along toward Santa Fe we heard about a wagon and a girl dressed like a man and we knowed we was right."

Hank chuckled. "You must be playing long shots, Haydon, and that ain't like you. Soon as the lady dishes out supper we'll just take a look at that wagon." He paused. "I was pretty mad there for awhile when the troopers split up our bunch. But I reckon a two way split's a heap better'n a dozen ways. Jode, you see if we hit jackpot."

GREG kept his face blank as Jode wheeled and walked toward the wagon. The man climbed up into the bed, gave Greg's pallet a single careless glance and then started examining the sacks. There was a rifle under the pallet and Greg held his breath while Jode ripped at the sacks. Suddenly the man straightened, jumped out of the wagon and came striding back to the fire.

"It's there," he said eagerly, "more damn' yellow stuff than you ever saw!"

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Hank nodded, and his thick lips parted in a pleased smile. He looked from Gordon to Lita.

"Well, I reckon we can eat before we decide what to do with you."

Greg answered Lita's frightened, questioning stare with a slight nod. Jode sat down but he was restless, gold-struck. It showed in his feverish eyes, the nervous movement of his hands.

Hank had holstered his Colt but that meant nothing since he could have the weapon in his hand in a split second. Greg knew what would happen. He'd be shot out of hand; so would Lita, if she was lucky. He pictured the rifle still under the blanket but for all practical purposes it might as well be back in Golconda.

Greg sipped at the coffee and only toyed with his food. Hank and Jode ate avidly but they kept a constant and sharp watch on the two captives. Finally Hank pushed aside his plate.

"We sure thought you was dead, Greg."

"I came close," he answered.

"I was in too damn much of a hurry," Jode nodded. "That won't happen again."

Lita could not suppress a gasp, but Greg's expression didn't change.

He shivered and looked around at the night, shivered again. "I still can't ride or do much, and I got to take care I don't chill or break the wound open again."

Jode grinned. He won't have to worry very much longer, will he, Hank?"

"Not much longer," Hank nodded and took another sip of coffee. Greg shivered again and hoped that it looked natural. He glanced around at the wagon.

"I'm getting cold right now. I'd like to get a blanket."

"Sit and shake," Jode answered shortly. Greg looked appealingly at Hank.

Hank considered Greg over the rim of his cup and mockery showed in his eyes. He shook his head at his brother. "Now,

Jode, we don't want a friend to get sick before we shoot him. Besides, it'll save us wrapping him up afterwards. We can watch him all the time anyhow."

Jode appreciated the cruel joke. "You're right, Hank."

Greg carefully pulled himself to his feet, and he didn't have to feign his slow pace to the wagon. Jode and Hank watched him while Lita sat immobile and white-faced. Greg reached the wagon and leaned against it for support. He apparently rested his head on his arms, so weak he had to rest a moment.

Jode snickered. "Is he sick or scared?"

"Sick, Jode," Hank answered. "We got to shoot him easy-like."

Greg's hands touched the rifle under the blanket. He fumbled a moment, then worked the lever, throwing a cartridge into the chamber. He had one shot and he had to make it count. He picked up the blanket, draping it over the rifle.

He started back to the fire, moving slowly, trying to gather his strength for what he knew was to come. He was within a few feet of the fire when he saw Hank's big face suddenly tighten with suspicion. The man's hand started toward his holster.

Greg swung the rifle up, letting the blanket fall. The weapon hardly touched his shoulder before he fired, his bullet catching Hank squarely in the chest as the man's Colt streaked out of the holster. Greg whirled and threw the rifle straight at Jode, whom surprise had held momentarily paralyzed.

The man jerked aside as the weapon hurtled at him. Greg lunged toward Hank, fingers taloning to scoop up the six.

He glimpsed Lita. The girl darted forward, picked up the coffee pot and hurled it at Jode. Jode was forced to dodge again and he momentarily lost his balance. But his Colt was already free in his hands.

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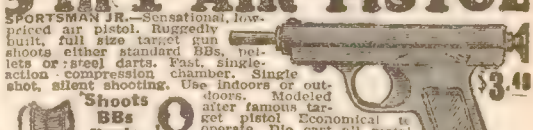

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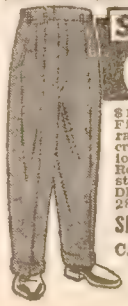

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GREG'S fingers touched Hank's gun. He twisted around, face white and lips set. He pulled the trigger, pulled it again, the two shots yammering into the night. Jode tipped over backward and his own Colt blasted uselessly upward, then fell from his fingers. He thrashed a couple of times and went suddenly limp.

Greg felt himself slipping and he hung on tightly to his senses until the dizziness passed. "Make sure," he whispered hoarsely to Lita. "Make sure." Then everything blanked out.

There was a familiar sense of movement and the warm feel of the blankets over him. Greg opened his eyes to find himself once again on his pallet and the wagon jolting slowly along the trail. Morning sun made a bright aureole of Lita's hair as she bent over him and smiled down in his face.

"Everything's all right, Greg. We've won through—definitely."

Greg sighed, pleased, and then became aware of the sound of riders around the wagon.

"Who's riding with us?"

Lita laughed. "Troops, Greg. Yankee troops. A patrol to check on what the Johnny Rebs are doing around Santa Fe so plans can be made to drive them out. We've delivered the gold and we've got an escort to the nearest Army post. I'm sure Dad will meet us there, since the Confederates couldn't hold him for carrying contraband or gold."

Greg smiled at her and reached up to touch her cheek. Suddenly she kissed him.

"That seals it, darling," Greg whispered. "Greg Haydon, gambling man, is dead. Someday you'll see Greg Haydon, attorney, if you're willing to wait."

"Do you have to ask?" she demanded. "Don't you know?"

No, he didn't have to ask. He could see the future in her eyes.

THE END

(Continued from page 109)

bear heller. I should have killed him when I first caught him!"

Spring came to the wild hinterland. Hak had found an old den in which to snatch a sleep of a few weeks duration. He came swaggering out into the sunlight, rearing and swaying on his haunches as the sun splashed his beautiful coat.

For a few days he nibbled delicately at the first green shoots of grass and herbage. Now a wanderlust possessed him and instinctively he moved back to the cragland country—to his mother's lair. He took his time, feeding lightly, and resting.

Today he was coiled, still sleeping in a light thicket, when suddenly a sharp cry struck him. He sprang alertly to all fours, listened to the call of a she-bear in distress.

Snarling, Hak leaped forward, springing agilely from one rock shelf to another. He broke into a lope along a narrow main shelf of rimrock, then came to a halt.

Ahead, down, crouched Maka. Between Maka and Hak stood a huge male grizzly.

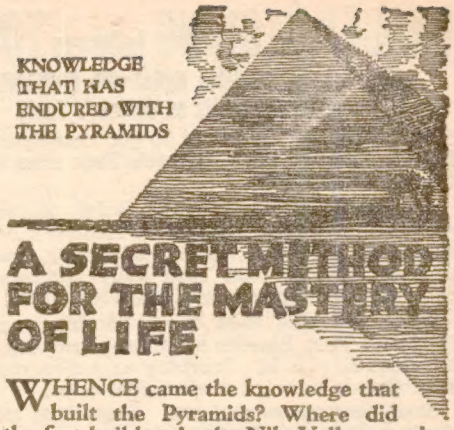
Hak's jaws gaped. He shuddered at first at the savage snarling of the big silvertip, but suddenly he charged and struck the big one a smashing blow in a flank, almost toppling him.

Before he could settle himself into fighting position, Hak had again dealt him a smashing blow in the shoulder.

The silvertip was old, almost blind, otherwise he might not have molested Maka and her black cub.

Maka took advantage of Hak's arrival and action. She rose and joined her wisdom and strength to Hak's. The grizzly caught her a glancing blow in the side of the head, almost spilling her. But as he rushed in to bite, he was himself bitten in a hind leg.

Hak and Maka now fought warily. They were forcing the big silvertip gradually, but surely, toward the edge of the rimrock. And now, from a nearby scrub



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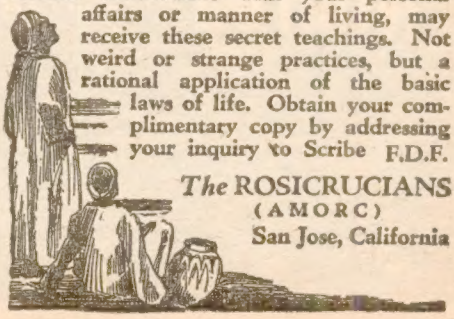

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thicket, came Maka's black cub, to lend assistance. . . .

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Suddenly, as the big silvertip whirled to smash at the old black, there was a flash of gold. Hak had struck! One of the grizzly's hind paws slipped, and Maka drove in furiously, sending, the big one hurtling out over the rimrock's edge. . . .

The man gasped as he watched the whirling, tumbling form of the big one crash to the rocks below. It was while he stood thus, that Maka caught his scent.

Maka whined a warning call and spun, plunged into the thicket followed by her young.

For some time they rested together. It was Hak who took the initiative, who rose and champed his strong jaws. He weaved about his mother and sister, then moved off through a belt of timber to the creek.

His jaws suddenly snapped and fastened on the body of a squirming ten-pound pike. Eyes flashing, growling contentedly, Hak waded ashore. He flopped and feasted, while his mother and sister fished for their own meal.

Again Hak returned to the riffles and made a catch. When his belly was finally filled, he yawned, stretched his limbs, then shambled off, in a swaggering rolling gait to seek the warmth of a slab rock ledge to sleep—serene in the acceptance of his power and majesty.

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Fits Any Standard Faucet

KEM INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER fills a long and urgent need in basement, garage, cottage, tourist camp, office and factory—and when home hot water supply fails in kitchen or bath.

Fully Guaranteed

Heater is precision made and guaranteed against any and all defects in material and workmanship. With ordinary care, it gives many years of satisfactory service.

KEM COMPANY, Dept. 37, 18 E. 41st St., New York 17, N. Y.

Check THESE ADVANTAGES

- √ NO MOVING PARTS to wear away or get out of order
- √ Runs on AC or DC current
- √ Constructed of handsome hammered aluminum
- √ Measures 2¾" x 3¾", requiring small storage space when not in use
- √ Fits any standard cold water faucet
- √ Carries 7-foot extension cord
- √ Takes only few seconds to attach or remove
- √ Exceedingly low cost operation — only a few cents an hour
- √ Fully guaranteed against defects in material or workmanship

NOW ONLY $3.98 ★

YOUR MONEY REFUNDED WITHIN 5 DAYS IF KEM HEATER FAILS TO GIVE INSTANT HOT WATER!

Don't be inconvenienced another day by lack of hot water in home, cottage, office or factory. ORDER YOUR KEM HEATER TODAY! SEND NO MONEY. Just fill in and mail coupon and then pay the postman $3.98 plus postage when your heater is delivered, or send $3.98 and we will pay postage.

KEM COMPANY
Dept. 37, 18 E. 41st St., New York 17, N. Y.

☐ Rush KEM HOT WATER HEATER C.O.D., I'll pay postman $3.98 plus postage.

☐ Enclose $3.98, send postpaid.

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For Coupes and All Front Seats — Unbeatable Low Price $3.98 POST PAID

Sedans and Coaches COMPLETE SET — Front and Back Seat $6.98 POST PAID

Fits most Cars!

Slips on in a Jiffy!

Colorful, Water-Repellant Scotch Plaid Fibre

RICHLY GRAINED LEATHERETTE TRIM

We challenge comparison because nowhere . . . but **NOWHERE** will you get these **fine seat covers** at our **low price!** Yes, thanks to our amazing **direct-from-distributor to you** plan, you can now own long wearing DeLuxe Auto Seat Covers at much **lower** prices than you pay elsewhere. And don't let our low price lead you to confuse our fine covers with those being sold elsewhere. No indeed! These are top-quality, **DeLuxe** Seat Covers finely tailored of rugged, **water repellent** scotch-plaid fibre and **richly grained leatherette.** Their smooth fit and handsome appearance will vastly improve the looks of your car, make it easy for you to slide in and out, protect your clothing and upholstery, and check driving discomfort. **SEND NO MONEY . . .** pay postman $3.98 plus postage or send cash and we pay postage. If not completely delighted return within five days for refund under our **you-must-be-pleased—or money-back guarantee.**

Check YOUR CHOICE OF Front Seat STYLE

A SOLID BACK For 4-door Sedan.

B DIVIDED BACK SOLID SEAT For Coupe or Coach front.

C INDIVIDUAL SEATS For divided back and seat.

SOLD ONLY BY MAIL Order Direct and Save

American Merchandising Co., Dept. SC105
9 Madison Ave., Montgomery 4, Ala.

Please send me the DeLuxe Seat Covers for car checked off below:

Make_____ Model_____ Year_____ Price in Canada add 50c. No C.O.D.'s

FRONT SEAT TYPE—A_____ B_____ C_____

CHECK ONE ☐ I am enclosing $_____ in full payment. Send Postpaid.

☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman $_____ plus postage.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone____ State_____

STEAMING HOT WATER
All You Need For 101 Uses

PRESTO-ELECTRIC WATER HEATER

For a Limited Time Only $4.98 2 for $9 POST PAID

FAST . . . CONVENIENT . . . SURE!

Now you can enjoy the luxury of steaming hot water . . . anytime, anywhere . . . and you don't have to heat your house to get it! Simply plug heater's cord in socket and **presto:** you have the hot water you want "in no time at all!" Completely portable and lightweight. Carry it anywhere! Use it for everything from boiling eggs to taking a bath. Immediate delivery guaranteed **only if you act now!**

SEND NO MONEY: Merely pay postman $4.98 plus postage on delivery. Or send cash and we pay postage. If not delighted, return in 5 days for refund.

AMERICAN MERCHANDISING COMPANY,
9 Madison Ave., Montgomery 4, Ala., Dept. PH141

YOUR SAVINGS MOUNT UP LIKE MAGIC BECAUSE YOU . . .

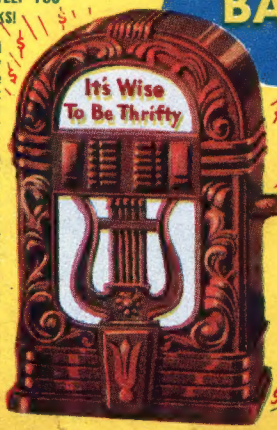
Make Money With Your Own JUKE BOX BANK

A Real Money-Maker for You . . . Because

FRIENDS AND RELATIVES WILL HELP YOU SAVE, JUST TO SEE HOW IT WORKS!

You'll see those nickels and dimes rapidly add up to mighty dollar bills with this new Juke Box Bank that's a gay plastic reproduction of the tuneful Juke Box down at the corner soda fountain. Bring it out at parties or when company comes to call. The coins and currency will really pour in, because **everyone** wants to see it light up electrically and flash its bit of advice: "It's Wise to Be Thrifty"—to which we might add: it's **easy** to be thrifty when you have an attention-getting, fun-producing Juke Box Bank.

SEND NO MONEY: send only your name and address. Then pay postman only $1.98 plus postage. If you are not delighted, return within 10 days for speedy, cheerful refund.



$1.98 Post Paid Complete With Battery & Bulb

Put Your Coins in Slot and Press-in! JUKE BOX BLAZES WITH LIGHT AS IT FLASHES: *It's Wise to be Thrifty*

AMERICAN MERCHANDISING COMPANY, 9 Madison Ave., Montgomery 4, Ala., Dept. JB18